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**Protofeminist Characters in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*
and *Mansfield Park***

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(Smjer: Britanska književnost i kultura)

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Historical Context

*It is a truth universally acknowledged*¹, that women have throughout history been given an inferior position by the men-dominated class society. Such notion was still prevalent in the middle and the upper classes of the eighteenth-century Britain, where a woman's social status was connected to the status of her guardians' – meaning her father and husband. In order to fulfil her duty, a woman was obliged to comply first with the social role of an obedient daughter, and then with the role of a reproductively capable wife. Even though the society was slowly modifying to accommodate growing demands of the individual for autonomy, such notions neglected to include the other half of the society – the women. From a young age, a woman was taught to appropriate the man's opinion without objection or, if there should be any inappropriate outburst of independent thought, be the sufferer of moral condemnation.

The beginning of the women's struggle for the improvement of their moral and social status cannot be pinpointed to a precise date in time, but it is safe to infer that it has been a long and steady process undeniably associated with the education of women and with the manifestation of a new social class – the middle class. As the access to education became less male oriented, although there continued to be a division of education along gender lines, more and more women ventured into doing something that was previously considered an 'unfeminine' activity – writing. Gradually, the women writers even gained widespread exposure and an eager audience. British history before the Industrial Revolution suggests that there have occasionally been individuals, predominately of a higher social status, who have expressed their positive stance on the prospect of bettering the female position in the society. However, it is often held that in the eighteenth century gender-consciousness and, what could in today's terms be described as, feminist attitudes became pronounced subjects of literature. However, the harsh reality was that the female authors who openly wrote on those subjects were mostly castigated for the sake of propagating patriarchal and insolent sensibility toward

¹ This is a reference to the opening line of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* used to enhance the tone of the social criticism found in the rest of the sentence.

the intellectual abilities of women². However, the fact that female authors in general were read and discussed is what made the subject relevant and what changed forever how their works would be written and observed.

1.2. Defining Terminology

The problem presents itself when trying to connect the agenda of female authors of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries and the modern term *feminism*. *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines feminism as “the advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of sexes”, with an addendum: “In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffragette movement in the late 19th century that there was significant political change.” (Soanes and Stevenson 635). This definition implies a politically organised movement for obtaining gender equality, and the addendum clearly suggests that it would be imprudent and anachronistic to label British female authors of the earlier years as feminists, since there was no formal feminist movement at that time. Contrary to that, Devoney Looser suggests that some scholars proposed the equalization of categories “the woman author” and “the feminist author”, arguing that every attempt of writing “makes a woman author an activist” for she “[breaks] with the strictures for ‘proper’ gendered behaviour” (Looser 3)³. In order to avoid misinterpretations and ahistorical conclusions, the term *protofeminist* will be utilized in the naming of female authors who solicited advancement of women’s social and moral positions prior to the modern feminist movement.

Protofeminist authors, who laid the groundwork for the feminist theory, were the ones mostly targeted by that, in today’s terms, sexist fashion. The most controversial author of the time, and arguably the most contributing to the advancement of protofeminist thought, was Mary Wollstonecraft. Several critics joined a debate on whether Austen was influenced by those radical writers, Wollstonecraft in particular. Those opposed indicated Austen’s voluntary isolation, orthodoxy and apolitical tendencies⁴, while those in favour suggested that Wollstonecraft’s arguments are comparable to the significance of some of Austen’s female

² For example, Mary Wollstonecraft’s morally questionable life was, after her death, highly discussed and used to discredit her and undermine her contribution to the improvement of a woman’s status in the society of her time.

³ Looser names Dale Spender and her work *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Writers Before Jane Austen* as one of the propagators of that theory (Looser 4).

⁴ As Looser notes, Virginia Woolf stated that Jane Austen was influenced by the conservative society and her close-knit family, and because of that her works cannot be regarded as feminist (Looser 5).

characters. Lloyd W. Brown, in his 1973 article, suggests that “[Austen’s] themes are comparable with the eighteenth-century feminism of a Mary Wollstonecraft insofar as such feminism questioned certain masculine assumptions in society” (Brown 324)⁵.

This thesis will put forward several observations identified by an examination of Jane Austen’s selected works. The purpose of said examination was to determine whether it is possible to affix the term protofeminist to her, and to her heroines: Emma Woodhouse, Fanny Price and Elizabeth Bennet. In relation to that, Austen’s works will be compared to inferences of Mary Wollstonecraft’s indubitably protofeminist work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*.

The main focus of the research was Austen’s representation of womanhood, gender relations and how she outlined sexual differences of the patriarchal society, and the complexity of her primary choice of subject-matter that some might consider trivial – the marriage. Although there are no factual confirmations of Austen conscious protofeminist tendencies, this thesis proposes that Austen indirectly took part in a new social movement that wished to alter the ingrained patriarchal order and ideologies of male dominance and female subordination, and that she did so by portraying certain characters and their protofeminist attitudes.

⁵ Also, among the critics who explicitly connect the writings of Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft is Margaret Kirkham: “...Austen’s subject matter is the central subject-matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism and that her viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (Kirkham xxi). This thesis uses such inferences as propounded by Margaret Kirkham and Lloyd W. Brown when examining Austen’s characters and the question of them exhibiting protofeminist attributes.

2. WOMANHOOD REVISED

When taking into consideration a protofeminist insight into Jane Austen's selected novels, the first thing that demands attention is Austen's portrayal of womanhood, its relation to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and the position of women within the society of that time. Since the term womanhood represents the distinguishing character or qualities of a woman, looking back, it is evident that the general identity of women of that time might be associated with words like: senseless, inferior, submissive, inactive, and lacking competence naturally available to men. As a direct supporter and representative of the protofeminist tendencies, Mary Wollstonecraft belonged to an emergence of female writers who openly questioned the ingrained difference of morality between men and women, and opposed those eighteenth century theorists who advocated that women naturally lacked the ability for rational contemplation, and that they shouldn't receive education.

It can be argued that Austen's approach to those subjects is so covert that it makes room for ambiguity. In order to analyse Austen's possible intentions regarding the portrayal of her heroines, this chapter will start by juxtaposing the notion of an 'elegant lady' with the notion of a 'rational woman', and then note the redefinition of the father/daughter relationship.

2. 1. Being an 'Elegant Lady' or a Rational Woman

Even though the notion of elegance did not exclude the possibility of rationality, the society of the early nineteenth century clearly preferred the former when defining what a woman ought to be, and was very little interested in procuring the latter. Daughters were taught only the basics in academic subjects, while the main focus was on teaching them skills that were paramount to their future lives as wives and mothers. Mary Wollstonecraft vehemently opposed aforesaid order in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she also had no problem pinpointing the blame:

I attribute [these problems] to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers ... the civilised women of this present century, with a few

exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. (*Vindication 2*)

Essentially, Wollstonecraft wanted women to gravitate towards the sense rather than sensibility in order to obtain the moral status inherently reserved for men, for they were also human beings and no less capable of rational judgement. Jane Austen did not have such bold pronouncements, but her divergence from portraying a typical sentimental heroine of the time, who was known as a woman of feeling rather than of rational thinking, makes for a case of attributing profeminist attitudes to her writing.

The best example of Austen's contribution to the redefinition of womanhood is her portrayal of heroines who are preferably rational as opposed to elegant. They value *reason* as a "supreme guide to conduct" (Kirkham xxiii). They are also more concerned with 'broadening of mind' than with mastering of accomplishments. Both notions fall under the scope of *education*. Throughout the novels, Austen's heroines became rational beings capable of critical thinking about their own individual experiences, and capable of performing moral judgement and social reading almost entirely on their own, or with a little help from another rational being. Their success is contrasted by the implementation of other female characters, which lack determination for mastering the rational and are more interested in being considered 'an elegant lady'. Those 'elegant ladies' are the prime example of being influenced by a, as noted by Gary Kelly, "courtly culture [that] trivializes and eroticizes women, leaving them with little alternative access to power but through intrigue and coquetry, and with few personal resources beyond indolence, immediate self-gratification, and self-centeredness" (Kelly 24). Their interests are in trivial affairs encouraged by a society that limited their education in order to exclude women from more important matters available to men to pursue.

Even though in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet proclaims: "We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary" (*Pride and Prejudice* 140), one might assume that there was not a particular interest in the education of the daughters by their distant father, who avoids the responsibilities of fatherhood, or their silly mother. The difference in character found in the five Bennet sisters can be attributed to leaving them to fend for themselves in choosing what sort of education, if any, would pique their interest. Such carelessness is surely to blame for the deficiencies of the younger Bennet sisters, who either display erratic behaviour toward being accomplished, or are given too much freedom,

which results in choosing idleness and accompanied silliness, ending in having no grasp for reality. In *Mansfield Park*, the education of the Bertram girls is far from ideal. Even though Sir Thomas wants to take part in the education of his girls, his lack of affection and reserve of his manners resulted in his daughters' hiding their true disposition and spirit from him, not having any love for him, and being relieved when he left for Antigua so they can enjoy their unrestricted freedom. As for their indolent mother: "To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention" (*Mansfield Park* 18). The girls are left in charge to the governess who taught them society's preferred accomplishments and basic information of the world; to Edmund's good judgement that carries no weight with them; and to their Aunt Norris, who subscribes to the ingrained notion of determining a woman's worth by the degree of her accomplishments, which resulted in wrongful forming of her nieces' minds. The narrator points out that the Bertram girls have had a flawed education and are "entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility" (*Mansfield Park* 18), things that mould good disposition. The fact that such faults are overlooked by the novel's society is affirmed in the establishment of Miss Bertrams "among the belles of the neighbourhood" (33). With that in mind, Jane Austen presumably thought poorly of such preference due to the fact that, by the end of the novel, she chose to exemplify to what such behaviour might lead.

On the other hand, the novel states in the beginning that Fanny's education was supervised not only by the governess who, granted, only "taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of history" (*Mansfield Park* 21), but also by Edmund who was very interested in Fanny's education. He encouraged her taste by recommending which books to read, and "... he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read and heightened its attraction by judicious praise" (*Mansfield Park* 21). In a way, he provided her with a proper education not really differing from the one given to him. However, it was Fanny who is determined to improve her mind more than anything from a very young age, when she proclaimed to her cousins that she didn't want to learn music or drawing. Fanny even admits to striving to be rational when trying to overcome her affection for Edmund: "She would endeavour to be rational and to deserve the right of judging of Miss Crawford's character, and the privilege of true solicitude for him by a sound intellect and an honest heart" (*Mansfield Park* 268). By introducing the notion of an honest heart, Austen combines sensibility with sense but makes it subordinate to the principles of sound intellect and self-government.

Other Austen's heroines, not just Fanny, all have "a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself" (*Mansfield Park* 20-21). As noted by Gary Kelly, Austen's heroines exercise mental operations crucial for execution of social reading: "observing, remembering, considering, having a sense of the probable, consulting the understanding, entertaining, judging" (Kelly 30-31).

Kelly also argues that:

[T]he protagonist's success in this exercise is shown to be commensurate with her degree of experience in reading books, as well as in reading society and herself. The exercise is crucial in that it is the precondition for successful negotiation between social expectation and personal desire – those of others as well as of the protagonist herself. (Kelly 31)

Throughout Austen's works there is a tension between the claims of the society and the claims of the individual. In order for a person to be guided toward independent thinking and performing rational judgement, those being the key pronouncements of protofeminist attitudes of the time, he or she must, as proposed by Mr Darcy: "add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (*Pride and Prejudice* 35).

Elizabeth Bennet, as Lloyd Brown pointed out, is "Mary Wollstonecraft's ideal woman" because she fits the mould of having, as Brown noted using Wollstonecraft's words, "precisely the kind of 'wilderness that indicates a healthy and independent mind'" (Brown 332). Wollstonecraft also pointed out that those women, "who have acted like rational creatures, or shown any vigour of intellect, have accidentally been allowed to run wild – as some of the elegant formers of the fair sex would insinuate" (*Vindication* 88). Elizabeth's 'wilderness' is attacked, after walking to Netherfield and showing up "above her ankles in dirt, and alone" (*Pride and Prejudice* 33), by Miss Bingley who is adamant that with such behaviour Elizabeth is showing "an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum" (*Pride and Prejudice* 33). Another occasion when Elizabeth is reprimanded for her independence of thought is when discussing with Mr Bingley her understanding of his uncomplicated character, her mother interjects with: "Lizzy ... remember where you are, and do not run on in the *wild manner* that you are suffered to do at home" (*Pride and Prejudice* 38, *my italics*). Although it is clear that Wollstonecraft referred to the independence of spirit that is abhorred by the 'elegant' ladies like Miss Bingley, and

silly ladies like Mrs Bennet; 'running wild' also refers to properly educated woman with the independence of mind to accidentally be allowed to think freely.

The specific evidence for independence of spirit and mind, although not the most positive one, can be found in Austen's novel *Emma*. Emma Woodhouse has all the best blessings a life could offer – beauty, happy disposition, intellect, and the most important thing for a woman of that time – security of a comfortable and wealthy home. Emma is, unlike other Austen's heroines, given a special social status of a sole heiress to Hartfield, home to the most respectable family in the county. Margaret Kirkham quotes Lionel Trilling's⁶ remark that Emma, due to her status, "has a moral life as a man has a moral life" (qtd. in Kirkham xxvi). This assertion speaks in favour of Austen possibly promoting the equality of sexes by showing what it would have been like if women had the same opportunities and the same treatment as men. With this in mind, it might be asserted that Austen promoted the equality of sexes within the restraints of the patriarchal society.

Even though Emma's situation in life points to perfection, Austen abhorred portraying characters as perfect and that is why Emma was condemned with being the most morally flawed of Austen's heroines. Her flaw is stated in the very beginning of the novel: "The real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself ... " (*Emma* 1). With pinpointing Emma's situation, it can be asserted that Austen implies that Emma's faults shouldn't be blamed entirely on her. She is like this because of her faulty education that lacked guidance and constructive criticism from people who should be the most involved in a person's education. Emma had only a "shadow of authority" (*Emma* 1) responsible for her education found in the character of Miss Taylor, whose "mildness of [...] temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint" (*Emma* 1). Both her father and the governess had an unrealistic image of Emma and "such an affection for her as could never find fault" (*Emma* 2). For that reason, and the fact that her father is not Emma's equal in activity of mind, Emma from the young age has only "[esteemed] Miss Taylor's judgement, but [is] directed chiefly by her own" (*Emma* 1).

Out of all Austen's heroines examined in this paper, Emma's independence of mind is tainted the most by her faulty upbringing. Even though Emma is "the cleverest of her family" (*Emma* 27) and "always quick and assured" (*Emma* 27), as pronounced by Mr Knightley, she

⁶ Kirkham quotes Lionel Trilling from "Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen", Introduction to the Riverside edn. of *Emma*, reproduced in *Emma: A Casebook*, ed. David Lodge, London, 1968, p. 154.

lacks “[submission] to anything requiring industry and patience, and [subjecting] of the fancy to the understanding” (*Emma* 27). Both Mr Knightley and Mrs Weston acknowledge that Emma should have read more as a child, and also should be reading more as an adult. Her numerous reading lists, put together when she was a child, mostly remained only a very well chosen credit to her judgement, for she never applied to steady reading. This is where Emma differs from Elizabeth and Fanny, for they both had help from an authoritative figure that stimulated them to enrich their mind by reading and gave them guidance toward appropriate literature that provided understanding rather than fancy – Mr Bennet and Edmund. Although it is understandable how Emma’s proper maturing was hindered by the lack of authority, or her rejection of any available authority, credit must be given to her having enough rationality never to succumb to the society’s preference for elegance of looks and accomplishments. Although being “a perfect beauty” (*Emma* 29) and “the picture of health” (*Emma* 29) she is never vain, and never has any desire to flaunt herself to attain people’s approval and flattery. She also has enough rationality to, in time, contemplate Mr Knightley’s reproofs and, at the same time, to examine her own behaviour and deem it faulty and in need of adjustment. Her capacity for the rational is never questioned.

It is also interesting to note the possibility of Austen critiquing the ‘elegant’ education provided by seminaries made by the narrator of *Emma* when talking about Mrs Goddard’s school, for it was not:

... a seminary, or an establishment, or anything which professed, in long sentences of *refined nonsense*, to combine liberal acquirements⁷ with elegant morality⁸, upon new principles and new systems – and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity – but a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding school, where a *reasonable quantity of accomplishments* were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies. (*Emma* 15, *my italics*).

There is little to be left to the imagination of what the narrator’s position, and possibly position of Austen herself, on such establishments and the education they provide. When the

⁷ Footnote from the book *Emma*, p. 391

liberal acquirements accomplishments fit for a lady

⁸ *ibid.*

elegant morality refined conduct, rather than abstract ethics

narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* explains Elizabeth's impression of the Bingley sisters, it is noted that:

They were in fact very *fine ladies*; not deficient in good humour when they were pleased, nor in the power of being agreeable where they chose it; but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first *private seminaries* in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves. (*Pride and Prejudice* 15, *my italics*)

Their education provided them with a set of accomplishments admired by the society, but the lack of "something more substantial" (*Pride and Prejudice* 35) made them conceited and their selective good behaviour fraudulent. The fact that Mr Darcy chooses Elizabeth Bennet, and not Miss Bingley using mean arts to employ for captivation⁹, as the object of his fancy, speaks volumes about which behaviour should be awarded, and which should be discouraged.

The society's preferred education in the accomplishments reinforced the patriarchal social order and the traditional concept of womanhood, while also stalling the woman's realisation as an independent person capable of critical judgement and rationality. Both Wollstonecraft and Austen made an unequivocal distinction between being 'an elegant lady' and a rational woman, and an undeniable preference for being the latter. While Wollstonecraft did it directly, Austen did it covertly with the portrayal of her rational heroines. Emma, Fanny and Elizabeth did not rebel against the society's expectations, but they were also not eager to increase their worth by mastering any accomplishments and being an elegant lady.

⁹ Mr Darcy's remark: "there is meanness in *all* the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation" (*Pride and Prejudice* 37) was cleverly aimed at Miss Bingley herself, and her comment against Elizabeth about her undervaluing her own sex to captivate male attention. This indicated his preference from early on.

2. 2. Examination of the Father/Daughter Relationship

When speaking of relations between the sexes, the fathers are the first ones to receive the task of guarding and protecting their daughters, and that is why it is interesting to observe Austen's portrayal of the parental authority and the way she positioned her heroines in father-daughter relationships.

What Mr Bennet, Mr Woodhouse, and Sir Thomas Bertram all have in common is that neither of them thoroughly fulfilled their fatherly duties, although with a different degree of complaint against them. They all made mistakes concerning the upbringing of their daughters, biological or adopted, by either not properly guiding them towards maturity, or by purposely avoiding responsibilities of fatherhood. In regard to this, Mary A. Burgan suggests that with the depiction of flawed father figures, Jane Austen implicitly made a critique of the patriarchal hierarchy as a proper foundation for social organisations (Burgan 537). If this should be the case, Austen also implicitly promoted certain protofeminist ideas circulating at that time: female emancipation from male domination and improvement of female status to that of a morally equal being capable of the same rational inferences based on critical observations of individual experience.

In regard to protofeminism, this thesis examines Austen's heroines' submission to paternal authority and whether they upheld or undermined Mary Wollstonecraft's assertion that "...the absurd duty, too often inculcated, of obeying a parent only on account of his being a parent, shackles the mind, and prepares it for a slavish submission to any power but reason" (*Vindication* 351).

2.2.1. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Bennet

The relationship of Elizabeth and her father is indicative of one of the closest bonds between a father and his daughter in Austen's novels. The reason for such a bond is the fact that Austen made them very similar and equally capable of rational observation and judgement. They are both equipped with the quickness of wit and sharpness of mind, although Mr Bennet did not immediately give Elizabeth credit of the latter.

Even though Mr Bennet is mostly considered the most lovable of Austen's patriarchs, he isn't very successful in his socially prescribed role as a father. As suggested by Gary Kelly:

“Mr Bennet’s social values and practices clearly represent the best of an intellectualized or professionalized gentry, but he has been insufficiently attentive to the necessity of ensuring the stable succession of those values and practices” (Kelly 27). This notion is scrutinized and expanded by Mary A. Burgan, who notes that Mr Bennet should have been the representation of social values of the time, but by him deliberately being either absent or not serious, he is “the only consistent and unyielding critic of the society in the novel” (Burgan 539). This thesis will not discuss implications of viewing Mr Bennet’s character as a rebel, but rather discuss how his behaviour affected the lives of his daughters.

Mr Bennet is an intelligent man who chose a merely beautiful wife that turned out to be irrational and ridiculous, which were the traits he realised only after her looks and introductory charms have faded. As a reaction to his dissatisfaction, Mr Bennet does everything to escape the authority fixated to a social role of a father. Being distant to his children, wife, and life in general is his greatest failing. Regrettable life choices turned him into a voluntary social recluse, who mostly spends his days reading books in his sanctuary – the library, or in utilising his sarcastic wit to mock and taunt everyone for his own entertainment. Burgan notes that “his minor satirical victories are to be savoured, but his preoccupation with them at the expense of his real obligations as a father causes him to forfeit the moral justification for irony as the novel progresses” (539). The average reader quickly forgets his faults because of the humorous effect his remarks provide and because of his fondness for Elizabeth.

When describing his children, Mr Bennet notes: “They have none of them much to recommend them; they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (*Pride and Prejudice* 4). The reason why he is singling her out as his favourite is precisely because, out of all his daughters, she is the most level-headed and the most observant, and those are the traits he valued the most, and which he himself possesses. He recognises her as his equal in having the ability to comprehend and appreciate his witty sarcasm, but he also includes her, to some degree, among his silly daughters with many convenient failings to laugh at. He only admitted his culpability for having such silly daughters after he was presented with evidence for his failure as an educator of morals; and his failure to provide them with any financial security. Mary A. Burgan refers to this admittance as Austen’s criticism of fatherhood set up by the society (Burgan 537).

The fact that Elizabeth is portrayed as being intellectually superior on the matter of Lydia's going away to Brighton, might be considered as Austen's disregard of the parental authority. After observing the possible repercussions of such act, Elizabeth advised her father not to let Lydia go:

She represented to him all the improprieties of Lydia's general behaviour, the little advantage she could derive from the friendship of such a woman as Mrs Forster, and the probability of her being yet more imprudent with such a companion at Brighton, where the temptations must be greater than at home. (*Pride and Prejudice* 195)

Elizabeth presents a reasonable case only to be mocked by her own father who purposely avoids the opportunity to do what a parent should and teach his children to know the right from wrong. Elizabeth even calls him out on it:

If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. (*Pride and Prejudice* 196)

After the worst case scenario happened, Mr Bennet realises his mistake and does not hesitate to, in a way, apologise to Elizabeth by saying: "Lizzy, I bear you no ill will for being justified in your advice to me last May, which, considering the event, shows some *greatness of mind*" (*Pride and Prejudice* 248, *my italics*). However, it can be shown that this chain of events didn't change him to be a more respectable patriarch. He acknowledges his remorse in the matter by proclaiming: "No Lizzy, let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression." (*Pride and Prejudice* 248), but he also says that "It will pass soon enough" (*Pride and Prejudice* 248). When the problem is solved by Lydia's marriage to Wickham, Mr Bennet "naturally return[s] to all his former indolence" (*Pride and Prejudice* 257).

With Mr and Mrs Bennet being less than ideal examples of marital bliss and proper parenting, Austen made sure that Elizabeth is exposed to the notion of what the adequate parental figures should look like in the portrayal of Mr and Mrs Gardiner, Elizabeth's aunt and uncle. As Burgan notes, "[Mr Gardiner] represents the restoration of a locus for the authority abdicated by Mr Bennet..." (543). They are, apart from Jane, the only family members Elizabeth is not ashamed of in terms of their proper behaviour and the way of thinking. Their only blemish, as determined by the society of the time, is that they are born

into the middle class and not the gentry. They are rational about the significance of Lydia's rescue to the reputation of the entire family, and Mr Gardiner engages into discussion about the possible solution with Darcy as his equal in the gentlemanly behaviour. With all this in mind, it is clear why *Pride and Prejudice* ends in praise of the Gardiners and expressing gratitude "towards the persons who, by bringing [Elizabeth] into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them" (*Pride and Prejudice* 325).

Austen's portrayal of the loving but flawed relationship of Elizabeth and her father; and also of Mr Bennet's admittance to a mistake which led to an implicit notion of Elizabeth's rational equality, gave her readers a better model of what a relationship between a father and a daughter should look like. Austen also illustrates a perfect model of parental and filial relationship in the depiction of the Gardeners.

The fact that transference of these relationships into the early nineteenth-century reality would signify questioning the validity of the existing social structure of patriarchal authority and supremacy, it gives evidential support to a claim of Austen's protofeminist tendencies because it projects an idea of the family dynamics and the family roles that would become current in the following periods.

2.2.2. Emma Woodhouse and Mr Woodhouse

The usual father – daughter dynamic is really put to the test with the portrayal of the relationship between Emma Woodhouse and her father. Emma Woodhouse is a very atypical heroine. Because of the father's disposition and status, Emma is the mistress of the house in possession of a large fortune and at liberty to do just as she pleases. Margaret Kirkham suggests that with the depiction of Emma as a privileged heiress, Jane Austen shows the dangers of prosperous circumstances (Kirkham 136). It is not reasonable to think that giving unsupervised independence to a young person will not result in an array of wrongful judgements on their part. However, Emma's faults are not a by-product of only her individual predisposition, but also of a faulty education.

Mr Woodhouse's role in Emma's education is, as Margaret Kirkham suggests, being a harmful influence by encouraging pride and self-importance (151). He is also to blame for hindering Emma's maturation by wanting her to stay his perfect daughter who is always catering to his needs. Even more, he is to blame for obstructing Emma's experience of life

and of the world beyond his little safe bubble of perpetual stagnation. Due to his incapability of taking care of himself, Mr Woodhouse, unintentionally yet selfishly, makes sure that Emma will never leave him because she is a kind-hearted dutiful daughter. As the end of the novel suggests, she ultimately never did. Emma is not blind to her father's faults and of him not being her equal, as the narrator suggests: "She dearly loved her father, but he was *no companion* for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful..." (*Emma* 2, *my italics*). However, because he is benevolent and his whims do not hurt anyone, she takes care of him and indulges him as someone would indulge a small child. Similar to how one would handle a child, Emma also intervenes when he asks for something too ridiculous but in a way that does not show her apparent superiority, making sure his feelings and his appearance of authority don't get bruised. Emma's rational superiority over her father and his irrational apprehensions are a case in point of a protofeminist tendency Austen's characters exhibited.

Not to be mistaken, Emma is rationally the more superior of the two, but she isn't rational in every segment and situation of her life. Emma, in the beginning of the novel, experiences idleness commonly attributed to women of her status and position. Even though the women of a higher social status and position were, in that time period, sometimes given the same moral status as the one inherently given to men, their social role, where they exercised perks of that status, was very limiting. While gentlemen of the time are usually given different ways to achieve a true sense of purpose in life, women like Emma have only a narrow scope where they could be of service to others. That is why Emma is gladly helping those less fortunate than her, but it is also why she dabbles in, what Mr Knightley sarcastically calls "[a] worthy employment for a young lady's mind!" (*Emma* 8) – the matchmaking. Such an act of Emma seeking to fulfil a greater purpose primarily given to men, might be considered rebellion against the gender stereotypes, and against the lack of a more meaningful input women had in the society, as well as rebellion against society's customs.

In the beginning of the novel, Emma finds the greatest amusement in meddling in the affairs of others, and claims success for arranging the marriage between Miss Taylor and Mr Weston. As a common occurrence, Emma's ego is checked by a sarcastic comment from Mr Knightley: "Success supposes endeavour. Your time has been properly and delicately spent, if you have been endeavouring for the past four years to bring about this marriage ... You made a lucky guess; and *that* is all that can be said" (*Emma* 8). In a way, Mr Knightley is a

replacement father figure to Emma by supplying her with the right moral guidance by reprimanding her bad and encouraging her good behaviour. He is a supplementary authority willing to guide Emma to be the best version of herself, but Emma's childish inclination of thinking that she knows best about herself and about the other people's feelings, prompted her to reject his well-meaning criticism over the longest part of the novel. Only towards the novel's end, after a rational observation of her own matters of the heart prompted by her growing love for Mr Knightley and his harsh critique of her behaviour, does Emma acknowledge Mr Knightley's authority and admits to her own flaws with a solemn resolution of their correction. When all things are considered, Emma is, by the end of the novel, Austen's most changed heroine of the three heroines examined in this thesis.

2.2.3. Fanny Price and Sir Thomas Bertram

Fanny Price is closer to a society's ideal of womanhood than any other Austen's heroine. She is timid, humble, physically weak and, above all, ready to listen to and respect any deserving authority. However, in a time when women were expected to listen and to echo the man's reasoning and conclusions, and not to question the validity of such reasoning by proposing their own, Jane Austen presented a heroine whose proper education led to forming a critical and observant mind that had enough "independence of spirit" (*Mansfield Park* 320) to stand by its moral judgement of a certain individual experience. As a result of such education, Fanny Price is an excellent judge of character. Ellen Gardiner describes Fanny's educational circumstances the best:

Although [Fanny's] education is meant to teach Fanny her proper role and place as an upper-middle class female reader, it ultimately leads to her achieving a critical authority, and therefore a public power and status within the society of Mansfield Park that the literary culture of the period is reluctant to afford to women. (Gardiner 152)

With the depiction of Fanny as an unexpected moral authority, when there are the likes of Sir Thomas and Edmund Bertram to be found in the novel, Jane Austen possibly questions the society's inclination to give moral and critical authority purely on the basis of the man's status or profession. Both Sir Thomas's authority based only on his social role of a father, and Edmund's moral authority of a clergyman-to-be, are challenged and rendered as flawed.

Sir Thomas Bertram is a representation of a typical patriarch who guards against the foreign influences, as well as demands obedience from everyone around him, moulding them to be what he and the society have envisioned. He bases his authority solely on that fact and demands that his judgement is never questioned. As proposed by Mary A. Burgan: “[His] anxiety about [fulfilling] his role as a father makes him a rigid man” (545). By appearing as stoic and severe, Sir Thomas neglects to form genuinely loving relationships with his children, which results in him not having the best insight in their true feelings and behaviour. The lack of information, as well as his perfunctory examination of the newcomers and their influence upon the moral righteousness of Mansfield, produces a defective moral judgement. Even though Sir Thomas wants what is best for his children and Fanny, he is ultimately, to a certain degree, responsible for their shortcomings.

After Fanny’s defiance against Sir Thomas’ wishes and her refusal to do her moral duty as an adopted daughter¹⁰, she is sent back to Portsmouth as “a medicinal project upon [her] understanding” (*Mansfield Park* 373). Sir Thomas hopes that by experiencing all the shortcomings of her biological family and their way of life, Fanny will become more appreciative of her blessings provided to her by living in Mansfield. Furthermore, that it will enhance her gratitude and make her more ready to accept the advances of such a superior suitor as Henry Crawford.

It is ironic that the one in need of adjustment of understanding is Sir Thomas himself. It is only after the tragedy of Maria’s elopement and of his elder son’s illness that he realised how wrong he was concerning his own behaviour that prompted such an occurrence. As pointed out by Mary A. Burgan: “Only after [Sir Thomas] has been able to recognize his practice of fatherhood as flawed can [he] reassume his authority and turn to his children for comfort” (547). As stated by the narrator, it took Sir Thomas a long time before he could forgive himself for such mismanagement of his children, particularly his daughters:

He felt that he ought not to have allowed the marriage; that his daughter’s sentiments had been sufficiently known to him to render him culpable in authorizing it; that in so doing he had sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of selfishness and *worldly wisdom*. (*Mansfield Park* 466, *my italics*)

¹⁰ More about the particularities of the incident will be discussed in the following chapter: *Marriage of the Equals*.

It is safe to assume that the 'worldly wisdom' signifies the society's preference towards advantageous marriages which resulted in a marriage being a contract between a father and a husband, and a woman being a commodity that would change its owner.

The narrator also notes the neglect regarding the upbringing of the Bertram daughters, which resulted in their moral decline: "To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments, the authorized object of their youth, could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind" (*Mansfield Park* 468). If the case should be made about Austen stating her own opinions on the matter through the narrator's criticism of a faulty upbringing, one can attest of her expressing protofeminist tendencies that advocated for a proper education of women.

In the end, Sir Thomas finds solace in the fact that he is able to redeem himself and finally be the esteemed father figure to his adopted children:

In [Susan's] usefulness, in Fanny's excellence, in William's continued good conduct and rising fame, and in the general well-doing and success of the other members of the family...Sir Thomas saw repeated, and forever repeated reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all, and acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure. (*Mansfield Park* 478-79)

Sir Thomas is, at long last, educated and reformed and willing to grant Fanny a better social status, which she earned by her 'independence of spirit'.

As noted by Mary A. Burgan: "The ideal behind the patriarchal family is the wise and humane father; when the fathers are irresponsible, unfeeling, and ineffectual, the social reality built upon them becomes vulnerable (551). Apropos of a wise and upheld paternal authority, there is the notion of a devoted and obedient daughter. From all appearances, Jane Austen adjusts the sentimental stereotype of the devoted daughter by making her heroines obedient only when there is no conflict with their moral judgements obtained by their application of reason and critical judgement. In relation to this, it can be asserted that Austen promotes having reservations in completely trusting the parental or spousal authority and that her heroines first and foremost rely on their own sense of what is right. This coincides with the protofeminist notion of a woman's obligation to Reason provided by the Providence and, in

relation to that, as Kirkham notes, “the probability of principled disobedience to lesser authority” (Kirkham 24). This is represented in the words of Mary Wollstonecraft:

To become respectable, the exercise of [women’s] understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character, ... women must bow down to the authority of reason, instead of being the modest slaves of opinion. (*Vindication* 107)

Amid all of the arguments, it can be concluded that Austen’s heroines ultimately bowed down to the authority of reason, and not to the paternal authority of the patriarchal society. This resulted in them being able to evade the harm every other neglected daughter experienced.

3. MARRIAGE OF THE EQUALS

Lawrence Stone highlights the fact that the seventeenth and eighteenth-century society was slowly changing vis-à-vis the sixteenth-century authoritarian relationships within the middle- and upper-class families (149). Married women were granted a slightly more equal partnership in marriage from their husbands with whom they had a more affective relationship, and the children had a somewhat better connection with their parents (Stone 149). This shift towards the modern worldview was in no way grand or fast paced. The principles of hierarchy and obedience were still at large. These principles were best demonstrated in regard to the unmarried woman, and it is the unmarried woman that captures most of Jane Austen’s attention. The only way a woman could have obtained social relevance and live up to society’s expectations, was for her to get married. That is why marriage was considered a “decisive act of woman’s life” (Southam 35).

As it is stated early on in the thesis, women of that time were preferably educated in fashionable accomplishments. The end goal was for them to excite attention of the polite society and to attract eligible suitors that would provide them with the coveted social status awarded to married women. Education in accomplishments provided better chances of finding a rich husband; it also served as a society’s mechanism of distinguishing between women by denoting their worth. Protofeminists of the time fought against this marginalisation of women, and the most vocal about it was Mary Wollstonecraft. This is what she said about marriage:

[M]arriage will never be held sacred till women by being brought up with men, are prepared to be their companions, rather than their mistresses; for the mean doublings of cunning will ever render them contemptible, whilst the oppression renders them timid. (*Vindication* 381)

What aligns Jane Austen with Mary Wollstonecraft, as suggested by Birgitta Berglund, is their view of marriage as a rational union of equals, as well as their opinion on female health and exercise, the authority of conduct-book writers like Dr Fordyce, and the convention of girls 'coming out' in society (Berglund 82).

The most important aspect of Austen's profeminism originates in her understanding of the economics of marriage dominant at that time, but also an opposition to them based on her representation of what an ideal union between a man and a wife should be and how it should be attained. Therefore, this thesis closely depicts Austen redefinition of marriage as a union of equals.

It can be asserted that Austen strived to describe her heroines in a way that they exude diverse and realistic characteristics, but what they all have in common, including their author, is "the predicament of being a woman in a man's world" (Southam 35), where principles of hierarchy and obedience were still at large. Their predicament of having to abide by the rules of the society meant that, most of them had to find husbands who would take care of them financially and give them a higher social status awarded to anyone who, at some point in time, becomes a missus. However, like every other social being, Austen's heroines ultimately want to find love and spend the rest of their lives loving and being loved in return. The notion of a romantic love and the profeminist tendencies are not mutually exclusive. The reason why Austen's heroines might be called profeminist characters is because they refuse to enter a loveless union despite the fact that it would mean advancement of their social status or saving them from becoming a destitute spinster. They do not sacrifice their moral values or their integrity to appease any authoritative figure or to meet any societal expectations. In the end, they all choose to enter a union with a companion that willingly admits to their moral equality.

3.1. *Pride and Prejudice*

Elizabeth Bennet, the main protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice*, might be the closest to a protofeminist ideal of a woman of all of Austen's heroines. Her refusal of two advantageous marriage proposals, her avid objection to marriages without love, and her blunt denial of authority makes her a prime example of how a woman should act and what actions she should condone. Through her character, Austen might have been voicing women's frustrations against the rigid and sexist social order.

Elizabeth is the second child in a family of five daughters. Due to the unfair law of the time that prevents females from inheriting property, the Bennet sisters are put in a predicament where the only way of surviving was to get married. Even though their prospects are so bleak, the only person obsessed with marriage is their mother. The ever-present fear of uncertainty one should be feeling in those circumstances, is not the main concern among the daughters. Each of them finds her own amusement to occupy their days. Elizabeth's main delight is observing the world and people around her, judging their character, and laughing at their follies, whims and inconsistencies. She possesses critical intelligence and a quickness of mind and she is more than ready to display those in every situation through her witty and teasing, and sometimes controversial opinions. Such liveliness and intelligence catches the eye of a proud, clever, serious and very rich man – Fitzwilliam J. Darcy, “[whose] manners, though well bred, were not inviting” (*Pride and Prejudice* 16). Their relationship from the first time they met is filled with misplaced pride and prejudice toward one another. Although always cordial, their repartee always demonstrates certain magnetism; it is sort of a competition in reasoning where they both showcase themselves to be equally adept. He is smitten by her independence of spirit, display of intelligence, light and pleasing figure and brilliancy of complexion after her impromptu inappropriately long and solitary walk. Of this, she has no idea and her judgement of his character falls short due to his reserved manners.

Since he has more information about her, provided by her openness, he spots her fault of ‘wilfully misunderstanding people’ (*Pride and Prejudice* 52) in another spirited conversation about a person's natural defects. It is true that Elizabeth tends to sometimes make a hasty judgement based on limited information. It is also true that she is deceived with Mr Wickham's looks and smooth lying skills. However, when she is presented with the letter that explains everything, in due time, she “weigh[s] every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality – deliberated on the probability of each statement” (*Pride and Prejudice*

174). Mr Darcy is her equal in that aspect too, for he deliberates about everything Elizabeth said about his misjudgements and errors of conduct and decides to repair them. Elizabeth, as Kirkham suggests, decides that Darcy's virtues of affectionate heart and a critical head outweigh his tendency to solemnity and self-importance, qualities imposed upon him by his education, upbringing and wealth (Kirkham 91).

They are perfect for one another in intellectual capacity, and also because they bring out the best in one another. They complement each other and prompt the other one to acknowledge their own mistakes. Even Austen wrote how mutually beneficial their union is going to be:

It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (*Pride and Prejudice* 259-60)

Even though Mr Bennet is surprised and incredulous at first, Elizabeth persuades him that she chose someone worthy of her. For he knows that “[Elizabeth’s] lively talents would place [her] in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage” (*Pride and Prejudice* 315). By giving Elizabeth freedom to make her own choice of who to love, Austen gave an example of an ideal dynamic between a father and a daughter. Also, by depicting a union of equals based on love, Austen gave an ideal model of what a marriage should be.

When all the matters of engagement were settled, Elizabeth and Darcy discuss how he ever fell in love with her. They both acknowledge that she was special and different from all the other ‘elegant ladies’:

The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking of *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*. (*Pride and Prejudice* 318)

As Nancy Armstrong observes, Elizabeth excels in none of the traditionally feminine qualities, and yet she has a prominent role in the society because of her “additional assets of character, traditionally masculine qualities of rational intelligence, integrity, self-possession, and particularly a command of words, all of which at first seem to operate as deterrents to marriage” (Armstrong 140). Mr Darcy falls in love with a well-rounded woman who is his

equal in every aspect, apart from being a female in a time when such a thing meant being a less valuable human being.

3.2. *Mansfield Park*

Fanny Price has several opposing characteristics which vouch for a good argument on the subject of her protofeminism. Considering her fragile predisposition, her kind and servile nature owing to her social position and her timid, submissive and gentle manner, one can make an argument that Austen meant to portray a truly sentimental heroine prescribed by the conduct books of her time. However, Fanny's true act of defiance against her benefactor Sir Thomas Bertram, because of her unremitting adherence to a moral code and the resolution not to marry under false pretences, might be seen as Austen's defiance against the patriarchal authority of the time. Back then, it was unthinkable for a young woman to go against the will of a male parental authority. And yet, against her uncle's severe reprehension, Fanny refuses the offer of marriage from Henry Crawford, a superficially excellent match, but a man she considers wrong and unworthy.

Jane Austen shows her brilliance in expressing irony through her depiction of Henry Crawford's take on marriage. When he first speaks on the subject, he proclaims:

No one can think more highly of the matrimonial state than myself. I consider the blessing of a wife as most justly described in those discreet lines of the poet "Heaven's last best gift". (*Mansfield Park* 42)

The reader should judge this declaration as him being covertly sarcastic, and telling his sister Mrs Grant what she wants to hear, especially because his other sister Mary Crawford, who knows him best, declares him to be "the most horrible flirt" (*Mansfield Park* 42). The irony of it presents itself later on when this statement became a reality. What started as a plan how to make Fanny love him because she is the only girl resilient to his charms, ended up with him genuinely falling in love with her. However, the reason for his love is not her mind, it is the beauty of her improved face and figure, her "gentleness, modesty, and sweetness of her character...that sweetness which makes so essential a part of every woman's worth in the judgement of man" (*Mansfield Park* 297). He values her steadiness and regularity of conduct and thinks that those derive from her being well principled and religious. He declares her of possessing the "touches of the angel" (*Mansfield Park* 347). Such representation of women

coincides with what was pronounced in the conduct books of the time as desirable behaviour and traits for women to possess. Kirkham suggests that men like Crawford are attracted to the 'angelic features' and want their wives to possess such vulnerable 'virtues' that excite both sexual passion and manly protectiveness (Kirkham 102).

When it comes to a woman's virtue, meaning the habitual goodness of their actions in every sphere of life, protofeminists argued that it should be regarded the same as a man's virtue (Kirkham 19). Both Austen and Wollstonecraft, as Kirkham suggests, are proponents of the same idea "that women share the same moral nature as men, [and] ought to share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct" (84). However, that notion directly opposes the preordained sense of womanhood constructed by the society of the time. Mary Wollstonecraft noted that:

Men are allowed by moralists to cultivate, as Nature directs, different qualities, and assume the different characters, that the same passions, modified almost to infinity, give to each individual. ...but all women are to be levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance. (*Vindication* 212)

While Wollstonecraft directly criticised conduct-book writers who promoted aforesaid notions of the woman's innate meekness and docility, in *Mansfield Park* Austen subtly approaches the subject. Kirkham notes that: "If Jane Austen created a conduct-book heroine, it cannot have been without an ironic intention of some kind" (102). Indeed, when juxtaposing Henry Crawford's perception with Edmund's, as well as their character, one can clearly see which of them deserve to be Fanny's true match.

Above all, Edmund sees Fanny, throughout the novel, as a sensible woman with rock-solid principles and "a gentleness of character so well adapted to recommend them" (*Mansfield Park* 355). He shares the same moral values, the same inclination towards the rational and has a great interest in her well-being both health-wise, for he got her a horse so she could improve her health by riding, and status-wise, for he wanted her to flourish and be less shy around others. Edmund wants Fanny to stand out more and not hide in the vastness of Mansfield, and to give her the social status she deserves. Even though Edmund Bertram has the most important role in Fanny's education and in her maturing into a rational and moral person, the role that should have been fulfilled by a father, he also loses his critical authority of a clergyman-in-training the moment he succumbs to worldly temptation provided by the

progressive Miss Crawford. He renounces his principles when he agrees to take part in the staging of *Lovers' Vows*, a play that signals "the end of all the privacy and propriety" (*Mansfield Park* 157). Edmund also fails to realise the true character of the Bertram siblings until it is too late, therefore his judgement of character is inferior to Fanny's. Even more so, Edmund thought, before he realised Henry's true character, that Fanny should accept his proposal and "prove [herself] grateful and tender-hearted; and then [she would] be the perfect model of a woman" (*Mansfield Park* 351). Despite all of Edmund's flaws and Fanny's clear mental superiority he himself acknowledges in the end, Edmund and Fanny are a perfect match of similar temper and no opposition of taste, "equally formed for domestic life" (479). What is even more important, they loved each other.

Even though Fanny is pressed by every possible authority and by society's expectations, Fanny Price never loses her integrity. Fanny held on to her principles even at the cost of being chastised by her uncle who, even though she wasn't his biological daughter, expected her to do her duty as a woman and be grateful enough to accept an advantageous opportunity for marriage that would upgrade her social status and denote his personal triumph. When Fanny opposed Sir Thomas' wishes, he blamed it all on her "independence of spirit...which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence" (*Mansfield Park* 321).

Even though she is of feeble health, she is not a weak character. She also demonstrates the protofeminist attributes by stating in response to Henry Crawford's advances: "I think it ought not to be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he may happen to like himself" (*Mansfield Park* 357). As proposed by Roger Gard: "Fanny's speech is, rather, an energetically rational account of the logical consequences of holding that people are free to choose" (Gard 140). Fanny, in the end, assumes her rightful place because of her consistency in displaying her powers of mind; she is awarded with an equal partner in life. The person who was reluctant to give her such a position, the benevolent patriarch of the estate Mansfield Park, admits to his own error of judgement of not recognising Fanny's knowledge of herself and her moral superiority. With her sound judgement, Fanny demonstrates protofeminist characteristics of a rational being who claims the equal rights as those available to men.

3.3. *Emma*

Emma Woodhouse, the main character of the novel titled simply *Emma*, also has some interesting points of view worthy defining as protofeminist. The mere title indicates the importance of Emma as a female character, as well as her independence from men. Her life is void of any real authority that would have steered her into the right direction when pressed with difficulties of growing up. Emma's faults are that she thinks "a little bit too well of herself" (*Emma* 1) and has too much freedom at hand to do whatever she wants. Due to her position, Emma has a lot of free time, which she fulfils with making herself useful to anyone deserving of her attention and talents. As the self-proclaimed matchmaker, Emma meddles in the affairs of other townsmen and gives herself a sense of purpose other than the one normally given to women. Such act might be considered as a rebellion against gender stereotypes, lack of meaningful input women had in the society, as well as the rebellion against society's customs.

Another thing that might be considered rebellious are her somewhat scandalous thoughts on marriage. Her position and employment as a daughter to a respectable but silly and mentally inferior man gives her freedom that no other Austen heroine possessed. Her situation permits consideration of being an old maid as a life choice due to her position as the heiress to a considerable fortune and property:

A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls, but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else. (*Emma* 68)

Even though this sort of thinking emphasizes her independence, the real reason why she never wants to get married is because her father gave every possible indication that he is opposed to change of any sort, especially the change of marital status that would be to his disadvantage. Being a dutiful daughter she has no intention to leave Mr Woodhouse, incapable of being in the world by himself. The only time Emma shows any concern is when she is given a glimpse of her impending future by socialising with a group of widows and spinsters.

All of this falls through the moment Emma realises that she is in love with Mr Knightley. As propounded by Mary A. Burgan, Mr Knightley is not simply a fatherly substitute for the inadequate Mr Woodhouse, but he is also "Emma's equal on active concern for the lives of those around him" (Burgan 548). However, his better judgement of the reality

surrounding them puts him in the position of authority that Emma, in the end, accepted. The novel, as Burgan suggests, affirms the ideal of a humane hierarchy through the character of Mr Knightley, but it also touches upon the ideal of a more open society (Burgan 548). The fact that Emma has proven her worth by showing the capacity for self-discovery is the reason why Mr Knightley regards Emma as his equal.

The reason why Mr Knightley is a perfect match for Emma is because he keeps her grounded: “Mr Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them” (*Emma* 5). He wants her to be the best version of herself so he mostly criticises her through playful comments, teasing and sarcasm. “[T]his was not particularly agreeable to Emma herself...” (5), but in Emma’s case it is necessary in order to give her a better perspective of things. Richard McDonald quoted June Dwyer when noting that “although Emma exhibits the ‘confidence and presumption usually reserved for Austen’s male characters’ (92), her inexperience causes her to take ‘the serious business of marriage too lightly’ (91)” (McDonald 106).

Even though Emma’s faults would justify proclaiming her inferiority to Mr Knightley, their union is, in the end, a perfect match of the equals. Emma’s realisation of her past mistakes and a firm resolution to be a better, more rational person, more acquainted with herself, makes for a case that she will apply herself more rationally into every aspect of her life. It is not to say that she will always be perfect or never make any mistakes, but she will have a loving husband who will never hesitate to, lovingly for sure, correct them. As James Kissane points out, they complement each other in a way as “to appreciate one another's qualities, and these qualities include also their differences” (Kissane 11). In the end, both Emma and Mr Knightley understood their mistakes and changed their opinion about the advantages of marriage by finally acknowledging the value of an equal companion.

The problem might arise when considering that Austen, by ending her novels in marriage, might be promoting the social maxim of the woman’s subordination to men. True, they all in the end accepted their domestic roles as wives. However, the fact that they all marry for love and that the union between spouses is considered the union of the equals, advocates for recognition of protofeminism portrayed by Austen’s heroines, and by extent, Austen herself. Jane Austen might not have ventured to explicitly and drastically change the woman’s status, but she did manage to show how unfair it was to be a woman in the patriarchal society of the time. Finally, while Wollstonecraft described the suffering of

women locked in domestic prisons by marriage, Austen gave, through the portrayal of her heroines, guidance on how not to end up in such a position in the first place.

4. CONCLUSION

Although there was no formal feminist movement in the pre-modern period, a protofeminist thought regarding the woman's subordinate position and a desire for improvement found its roots. Due to the increase in educated female readership, works of female authors became immensely popular, even to a point that some male writers took female pseudonyms and tried to emulate a 'feminine' style of writing. A society that embraced numerous ideologies of male dominance found itself at a certain crossroads – the beginning of a power shift. At that time, female writers like Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft had a decision to make on how they would approach the impending change that would adjust the woman's position in the world.

There are two opposing strands on whether Austen's novels are politically conservative or progressive, and the main arguments for either side are found in Austen's depictions of her female protagonists. Critics opposed to the feministic reading of Austen's novels argue that, among other things, her heroines support the existing social structure by ultimately consenting to the implementation of the social norm regarding their role in the society, particularly regarding marriage. The other strand, however, argues that Austen is one of the first fighters, covert or candid, for the rights of women.

The main difference between the supposed notions of Austen's and Wollstonecraft's protofeminism comes down to a different way of expressing them. While Wollstonecraft was directly adamant in indicating flaws of the social and legal systems of the time, as well as chastising women for bolstering the aforesaid systems, one can attest that Austen took a covert approach to the subject.

This paper's objective was to validate the theory of Jane Austen using her position as a woman writer within the literary world to shed some light on the woman's discriminatory position in a patriarchal society of the time, and her doing so through the depiction of her heroines possessing attributes that could be considered protofeminist.

The proposed evidence of why Emma, Elizabeth and Fanny might be the representations of protofeminist characters is as follows: Firstly, they were all more interested in being a rational woman as opposed to being an 'elegant' lady. They valued proper education, which influenced the improvement of character and morals, more than education in accomplishments that were considered a vital stepping stone to getting married. Secondly, Austen's heroines were all obedient daughters fulfilling their duties until those duties contradicted their moral principles or rational judgement, both provided by their preferred choice of proper education. Finally, even though all of Austen's novels end in marriage, they all propose breaking from the traditional marital expectations of the power dynamic between the spouses. Their relationship is established as an equal partnership provided by their equality of mind.

The asserted elements of protofeminism in Austen's novels suggest that Austen was aware of the larger social issues of her time. Austen adjusted protofeminist ideas to suit her own understanding and implemented them through a carefully chosen style of writing and with portrayals of realistically imperfect heroines. With the fact that their growth was sustained due to their own exercise of mind and application of reason and critical thinking, as well as the equality accorded to them by their male counterparts, Austen gave her readers examples on how to manage within that defective system. By presenting her readers with heroines to serve as an ideal to which one should aspire to; Austen left a profound effect on many readers and scholars willing to decipher the meaning which her novels are sure to deliver. Two hundred years later and that effect is still at large.

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6. ABSTRACT

Analysing the topic of protofeminism in three Jane Austen's novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*, apart from the introduction and conclusion, the paper consists of two main parts, which denote different characteristics of Austen's heroines that might be considered protofeminist.

The first part titled "Womanhood Revised" consists of two sections denoting how Austen covertly questioned the ingrained patriarchal order by portraying Fanny Price, Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet differently than what was considered prevalent in the society of the time. Having stated the reasons why Austen's heroines might be considered protofeminist characters due to their choice of a proper education rather than mastering accomplishments, and due to their relationships with their fathers; the rest of the thesis, in the section titled "Marriage of the Equals", analyses the topic of marriage and how Austen's novels depict a freely chosen companionate in marriage based on a spousal equality of the mind.

In Austen's case one cannot assert, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was a consciously protofeminist point of view, and that the purpose of her novels was to reveal her own protofeminist concerns. However, the fact that her heroines are exemplary of the claim that women share the same moral nature as men, that they should have the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibilities for their own conduct (paraphrasing Kirkham 84), makes for a good debate on Austen's protofeminism.

It is this paper's declaration that Austen's heroines likely exert atypical behaviour for women of their time and social affiliation. They presumably challenge the traditional expectations for women and question the validity of the ingrained patriarchal ideals of a woman's subordination to a man. Even though these selected novels end in marriage, they all propose breaking from the traditional marriage expectations of a power dynamic between the spouses. Their relationship is established as an equal partnership provided by their equality of mind. It would not be a stretch to pronounce this as a slow shift towards the modern worldview and that Jane Austen took part in its achievement.

Key Words: protofeminism, Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, nineteenth-century society, womanhood, education, the father/daughter relationship, marriage, equality.