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DUTY AND FEMINIST NARRATION IN AUSTEN'S PERSUASION

By

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B.A., Northern Illinois University, 2007

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Masters of Arts Degree

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Approved by:

Dr. Scott McEathron, Advisor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE NUMBER
Duty and Feminist Narration	1
Works Cited	18
VITA	20

"When I yielded, I thought it was to duty; but no duty could be called in aid here. In marrying a man indifferent to me, all risk would have been incurred, and all duty violated" (Austen 197). Anne Elliot is a dutiful young lady and a dutiful daughter to her family and friends within her class in terms of upholding their reputation, yet she suffers for it. Anne's previous perception of this duty's purpose is complicated, as she believes she behaved correctly in refusing a proposal from a man she loves, but one who lacks fortune and connection, regardless of the personal injury she incurs. By the novel's beginning she carries the weight of the consequences on her shoulders. This weight is so heavy it seems to alter her appearance in such a way that 8 years later, Captain Wentworth claims he would not have known her (85). Anne recognizes her family's ill notion of duty, which is loyalty to appearance and to social status, and this realization opens her to reexamining her own definition of duty to include her own happiness. She deliberates over her own understanding of duty against her family's vain and frivolous behavior and Lady Russell's prejudicial notions. She, unlike her family, values justice, equality and "clearing debt". This reading begs the question: Is Anne acting in defiance of, or within, the constraints on women in her society? One side of the critical debate argues that she stays within societal norms and remains dutiful by marrying a wealthy man while she is fast approaching, what is considered for the time, a non-marriageable age. Furthermore, Austen reflects the status quo by marrying her heroines in the established social order. In this reading, then, she is not a representation of a feminist ideal or even of the progress of women's position. On the other side, critics hold that through this novel, Austen focuses on women's ability to reason and the importance of women to be educated and viewed as "rational creatures" (121). This reading, puts

Austen in line with the established feminist thought of the day—Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which argues for the better education of girls since their eighteenth century educational system teaches "coquetry" and places women in a subservient role (Wollstonecraft 179). Anne desires marital bliss with Wentworth even if he lacks connection or fortune to recommend him and given a second opportunity and would respond differently to Wentworth's proposal of marriage. She admires, respects and even possesses a parental love for Lady Russell and naturally seeks her advice as she can be worthy of Anne's trust. However, it must be noted that Lady Russell "held a standard of good-breeding," "had prejudices on the side of ancestry" and "had a value for rank and consequence" (Austen 15). Therefore, it can be argued that Anne is putting her own happiness—duty to herself—higher in priority and displaying autonomy by choosing to defy Lady Russell's earlier advice against her engagement to Wentworth by the novel's end.

Through claiming love on her terms, she is advocating independence from her patriarchal and classist culture, while offering a new way to interpret love and marriage through their mutual love and their promising marriage. By highlighting her female sexuality through the narration of the text, Austen asserts female sexuality through Anne's consciousness, interiority and actions/reactions. She increases the awareness of the sexual politics of her time through her narrative style and sexually implicit language, which actually places her beyond Wollstonecraft's feminist argument to incorporate a sexual identity in addition to a sensible education. My contention in contrast to the first conservative argument and in drawing on the latter incorporating a more modern definition of feminism is that Austen, in addition to being a successful woman writer of

female consciousness, reveals her feminist ideology through Anne's sexuality and willingness to defy the societal norm and marry beneath her aristocratic status.

This feminist argument focuses on how Anne's consciousness is the authority on those around her and the lens through which the reader sees and interprets her world. For example, the two former lovers are reacquainted briefly:

...the others appeared; they were in the drawing-room. Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right; the room seemed full—full of persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it...Anne might finish her breakfast as she could...Soon, however, she began to reason with herself, and try to be feeling less. Eight years, almost eight years had passed, since all had been given up. How absurd to be resuming the agitation which such an interval had banished into distance and indistinctness!..Alas! with all her reasonings, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing. Now, how were his sentiments to be read? (Austen 53).

Anne displays, along with Wentworth, propriety and is courteous and polite. However,
Austen utilizes her free indirect discourse to reveal to the reader Anne's evaluation of the
situation. Although there are instances of "she", there are many sentences which seem to
come directly from Anne, thus displaying her as a deliberating and thinking person.

Certainly this narrative technique adds depth to the character of Anne Elliot, but the fact
that she is a female character is of greatest importance. The vast majority of events and
impressions of others are seen through her interpretations, the relationship between

herself and the other characters. Is Austen commenting on the woman question or simply reflecting her times and her experiences within her class?

In establishing a conservative view of Austen, a key critic, Marilyn Butler, sees these novels as "not revolutionary" in terms of feminist issues, and claims Austen simply presents "plots express[ing] a typical middle-class ethic of the day" and "comes out against...risk-taking" (Butler 289). Elizabeth Barrett Browning aligns her interpretation with Butler's and states Austen's "novels are 'perfect as they go—that's certain. Only they don't go far, I think." (Gilbert and Gubar 109). This reading starkly contrasts Margaret Kirkham's assertion that *Persuasion* "puts [forth] a feminist point of view" (Kirkham 147). What these critics do agree upon is Anne's consciousness as center to understanding the plot. Butler states she is uncertain of the significance or "how far this effect is intended," but the characters outside of Anne are only as important as "the impression they make upon Anne" (Butler 276). She further adds her notion of "inward interest" which gives the readers direct access to Anne's truest feelings. This is an innovative narrative move utilizing free indirect discourse, but it could also be read as a purposeful technique used by Austen to make a feminist statement by allowing the reader access to Anne's deepest passions and desires.

This interpretation of Austen's intended use of the consciousness is revealed through the examination of how other characters view Anne and what impression this leaves on her and thus, the reader. As the reader is looking around Anne's world, it is essential in understanding the power of the observation of others' expressions, body language and actions as insightful, critical and, assumingly on the reader's part, a correct interpretation of events and feelings. Anne is viewed as physically altered by Wentworth

since their last meeting and "he should not have known her" (Austen 53). Her father hardly notices or pays much attention to her, because he believes "her bloom had vanished early" and is "only Anne" (11). However, the reader learns she is gaining back, or perhaps never truly lost to "any people of real understanding," her attractiveness when Mr. Elliot stops, perhaps in flattery or perhaps to objectify, on the Cobb to look at her—a look "she could not be insensitive of" (87). Only with this gentleman's pause, does Wentworth turn to look at the appealing lady. For his part, he gives "a momentary glance...which seemed to say...[I] see something like Anne Elliot again" (87). Wentworth sees the lady he once loved and once desired and with whom he wished to make a lifelong sexual relationship. His sexual desire experiences a reawakening and is rekindled simply by looking at a *looker* and then following with his own *look*. He must first witness his former lover beheld by another suitor before he can allow himself to begin feeling anything more than what is decorous towards her. With this reading, the "look" carries implications of a sexual interest in Anne and she becomes, or arguably is confirmed, a sensual character.

Claudia Johnson touches on the concept of looking with the "spectator" as a "man of feeling" who requires a "constant supply of pitiable objects in order to arouse the benevolent meltings that validate their moral status" (Johnson 169). This idea is easily demonstrated in Wentworth when Louisa falls victim to her own willful tendency, as he stays in Lyme to watch over her recovery—that is, until he learns of his and Louisa's presumed engagement which sends him packing to his brother's. The point Johnson makes is that men are the onlookers as women are looked upon or looked over, while women "for their part, rarely look" (169). She further adds that some allotment is

available for heroines of sensibility for "counter-spectatorship...to take pleasure in watching themselves be beheld as weak, needy, dying" (170). These male spectators are present in the novel when Louisa falls in Lyme. Some gather around to help, but many gather to simply "enjoy the sight of a dead young lady" (Austen 93). Expanding Johnson's argument of counter-spectatorship, Anne is able to experience sensations based on how others view her, as she is being *beheld*. As explained shortly in greater detail, she experiences nervous excitement at the sight of Wentworth and these feelings become allayed at his polite disregard to her presence. In addition, her ability to see how others view her is empowering. She considers her own attractiveness as "destroyed" yet the attention of Mr. Elliot has contributed to her discovering, along with the reader, a second sexual blooming of sorts.

There are many instances in the novel where Austen narrates from Anne's perspective in order to establish her sexual feelings for Wentworth implicitly. In her first meeting with Wentworth after eight years, for example, she is overrun with "nervous gratitude" that the meeting is short, yet she feels the "agitation" resume even after such a long absence (53). Her nervous excitement signifies that her feelings of love for him are not lessened even with such a long duration of time; but more specifically, the feelings "resumed" are her passion and her desire for the man she has not stopped loving. After all, by her own account, "the years which destroyed her youth and bloom had only given him a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages" over her (53). The "glowing" reflects her sincere adoration for the captain. She sees this man glow based on her own bodily passion. The sexual heat and the passion she experiences, causes her to project this radiance upon him. In addition, her description of

"manly" is inherently sexual asserting her appreciation of his masculinity in an implicitly sexual way. He is the "same Frederick Wentworth," the same man with whom she wanted to make eternal love. For his part, he barely looks at her; he simply offers a "half eye", and "a courteous bow" (52). She believes his lack of acknowledgement is due to both bitter resentment of her previous refusal and the fact that she is older and her attractive youth is "destroyed". Later when she believes he is looking at her, again, she feels he is only searching "her altered features...the ruins of the face which once charmed him" (62). Wentworth refuses to give his former charmer any significant attention. By spurning Anne, Wentworth becomes this authoress' tool in the woman question. As Claudia Johnson explains:

Wentworth's anger deserves particular attention, because it is anything, but customary to fault women for diffidence. In another kind of novel by another kind of novelist, Anne's initial hesitation would strike Wentworth and us alike as exemplary and he,...would rather take umbrage at her maidenly doubt, manfully seize an occasion to prove his worth. But Wentworth does not appear to believe that the inconvenient modesty of the maiden will be redeemed by the submission of the wife, or to the value the 'feebleness' so often held to be part of a woman's duty as well as her charm (Johnson 149).

Although Wentworth's understanding of Anne's decision is flawed, his reasoning is revolutionary in regards to the time. This is a time when reticence on a woman's part is viewed as dutiful and attractive. Of course, it can be argued he simply has wounded pride, but more importantly his actions, or more like inaction, is in defiance of such a silly notion that woman should be submissive wives and so easily persuadable. He

blames her for her "feebleness of character" and unlike Mr. Elliot, Wentworth is a true gentleman who requires more than a superficial, physical attraction (54). This perspective offers Wentworth some allowance for his misinterpretation of Anne's character. Anne attempts to gain insight to Wentworth's feelings based on her perceptions through his actions, his reactions and his expressions. What they do not do is have a conversation about why she refused his earlier proposal or why he believes her refusal to be a negative reflection of her character. Austen uses this inability to communicate their feelings and opinions through dialogue to display subtly Anne's innermost thoughts and feelings about those around her and the man she quietly, yet passionately desires.

Unfortunately for Anne, she must endure all the feeling, including sexual and emotional. Anne not only is a "rational creature," but a person who values decorum. Although she experiences all of these intense feelings, she will remain composed and repress her emotions for this sake. Judy Van Sickle Johnson opens her article "The Bodily Frame: Learning Romance in *Persuasion*" by summarizing the novel as "Anne Elliot...reaches the certainty of romantic love through a most gradual process... [of] genuine pleasure, mingled with pain and joy, in the various sensations of her deeply felt physical life (Johnson 43). She is a reserved character, but she also is an emotional and physically sensitive one. She is often discomforted and agitated when in close proximity to Wentworth, but also feels pleasure due to her "own passionate nature" (44). There is a momentum within her feelings, however. Throughout the novel, Anne's feelings, both emotional and physical, undergo a movement from being painful to pleasurable by the

ending. Therefore, Anne experiences sexual feelings; some of these sensations are exciting, while others can be painful for her.

As aforementioned, Anne displays a feeble character, according to Wentworth, when she allows herself to be persuaded easily by Lady Russell. Interestingly, she again displays her considerable interest in what Lady Russell thinks when the two ladies see Wentworth in Bath. Although this moment is hardly as detrimental for Anne as her initial loss of her love, she does lose the opportunity to see Wentworth *look* at her because of her concern about Lady Russell's reaction to his presence. She is "anxious" and believes "her own countenance" is unfit to be seen. Initially, she feels meeting with both may be problematic, because it may reveal her enduring love for him to both. While walking alongside her friend, she believes Lady Russell is staring directly at him across the street:

She could thoroughly comprehend the sort of fascination he must possess over Lady Russell's mind, the difficulty it must be for her to withdraw her eyes, the astonishment she must be feeling that eight or nine years should have passed over him, and in foreign climes and in active service too, without robbing him of one personal grace! (Austen 145).

Again, the implicitly sexual language is significant: Anne projects, as she early displays, her desire for and her admiration of Wentworth unto Lady Russell, assuming she would naturally respond to his attractive appearance. Lady Russell's assumed "fascination" is a sexual one as Anne perceives her to be demonstrating, not only an intense interest for the man across the street, but an actual attraction for the charmer. Anne, again as it is her habit in doing so, attempts to read her friend's mind and interpret her thoughts. Lady Russell sees Wentworth's striking good looks and is momentarily taken by them. As a

woman of great decorum, she quickly responds with wit and in metaphor, rather than respond directly to Wentworth's pleasing good looks and open any dialogue with Anne about her former suitor. As there is no clear way to deny her gaze, she confesses to Anne with "You will wonder, what has been fixing my eye so long," but codes her reaction with a poor excuse about trying to locate the rumored best window-curtains in Bath. She definitely sees Wentworth and she definitely has not changed her opinion that he lacks worthiness of Anne, albeit finding his appearance attractive. Although Lady Russell closes her commentary with stating, "I confess I can see no curtains hereabouts that answer their description," she is making a definite statement about Wentworth. Anne knows her friend very well and understands her meaning clearly. She responds in feeling and not words; "Anne sighed and blushed and smiled, in pity and disdain." She "sighs" out of relief as she does not have to converse with Lady Russell about Wentworth and she is safe from expressing any feelings or from forcing a poor attempt at lying. In addition, she could be sighing with disappointment for her friend's decided views. Certainly with all his "grace", Lady Russell might attempt to accept a most worthy gentleman and see some blunder in her earlier assessment of him. Anne blushes out of embarrassment for both of their sakes and smiles to acknowledge the attention shift away from Wentworth. Furthermore, as Judy Van Sickle Johnson explains, Anne's blushing face is a "delicately controlled manifestation of physical discomfort and repressed sexual desires (Johnson 46). Anne's feelings of "pity" and "disdain" are most interesting. She may appreciate the avoidance, but she cannot help pitying her familiar predicament and scorn the class system to which she and Lady Russell subscribe. While again she is acutely aware of the pain attached to her feelings for Wentworth, Anne's greatest regret of all is not seeing

him *look* at her and laments how "she should have lost the right moment for seeing whether he saw them." Seeing herself *beheld* by Wentworth contributes to her sexual identity. Given Lady Russell's gaze, her poignant command and Anne's "one thousand feelings," the reader is left to consider whether it is Wentworth or the curtains Lady Russell describes and dismisses "as being the handsomest and best hung of any in Bath" (Austen 145).

Another notable scene where Anne's sexual feelings are displayed implicitly is when dining at Uppercross and "poor Dick" is remembered (58). While listening to Mrs. Musgrove lament the loss of her son to Wentworth, Anne begins to take notice of her beloved's expressions. Again, this act has two meanings; in one respect it is to interpret his feelings, but it also reveals her continued physical attraction towards him. She is aroused by simply being in a small proximity from him where she can watch his every movement and this closeness soon develops into a more passionate state for the heroine while moving from across the room to sitting near to her on a sofa. He first had a "bright eye" and a "curl of his handsome mouth" before he "shewed the kindest consideration" and his "natural grace" (59). To Anne, Wentworth possesses outward and inward desirability. She comments on his mouth and character signifying a sort of beginning to her sexual arousal. In addition to the blatant irony of her quiet objectification of his fine "graces" while a woman mourns her dead son, Anne also displays a sexual frustration while sitting next to Wentworth and Mrs. Musgrove:

They were actually on the same sofa—they were divided only by Mrs. Musgrove. It was no insignificant barrier indeed. Mrs. Musgrove was of a comfortable substantial size...and while the agitations of Anne's slender form, and pensive

face, may be considered as very completely screened, Captain Wentworth should be allowed some credit for the self-command with which he attended to her large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody cared for. Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction, as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize vain,—which taste cannot tolerate,—which ridicule will seize (59).

Rather than consoling the mother, Anne seems to get annoyed with her physical size. Austen's free indirect discourse is in play here and Anne's passionate desire is revealed in a most surprising manner. There are at least six references in two short paragraphs about Mrs. Musgrove's "substantial size" and this is purposely put in contrast with Anne's "slender form". Judy Van Sickle argues that Mrs. Musgrove's size is a kind of "social 'screen' that allows Anne's passionate impulses to remain undetected and unfulfilled by Wentworth; nonetheless, the sexual longings within the heroine's seemingly delicate frame are by no means screened by the reader, who perceives the agitation of suppressed desires" (Johnson 50). Although I agree that Mrs. Musgrove's "personal size" is helpful in covering the burning desires Anne feels while being so close to Wentworth, I believe this remark could have been made only once if this is the only purpose. Rather, Austen repeatedly mentions her physicality and this fact is significant in showing her repression of these desires, but also to reveal her painful frustration with them. Margaret Kirkham only refers to these references of Mrs. Musgrove as "harsh remarks" (Kirkham 153) and believes it is a narrative tool poking at Samuel Richardson, while Marilyn Butler refers to the scene as an allusion to the future Mrs. Wentworth and motherhood (Butler 276).

Both critics ignore the sexual implications and none of the three critics view the "harsh comments" as the observations of a sexually frustrated young lady whose sole object of desire is only a significant human barrier away. This close confinement with Wentworth is both exciting for Anne and yet, still incredibly painful for her to "tolerate".

The autonomous heroine does begin to receive some relief and move towards pleasure while visiting Lyme with the Musgroves, her sister and Captain Wentworth. As aforementioned, her cousin, Mr. Elliot does contribute to her awakening and to Wentworth's romantic interest, but it is solidified when Anne displays strong character and assertiveness while under pressure contrasting Louisa Musgrove's forthright blunder resulting in her physical ailment:

...when Anne coming quietly down from Louisa's room, could not but hear what followed...'Then it is settled, Musgrove,' cried Captain Wentworth, 'that you stay, and that I take care of your sister home...but, if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne!' She paused a moment to recover from the emotion of hearing herself so spoken of. The other two warmly agreed to what he said, and then she appeared. 'You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse;' cried he, turning to her and speaking with a glow, and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost restoring the past.--She coloured deeply; and he recollected himself, and moved away (Austen 95).

Fiona Stafford, author of *Persuasion*: The Gradual Dawning, comments on "Anne's inability to articulate her true feelings [and] has been marked by politeness, silence and a telling array of flushed cheeks, sighs, and tear-filled eyes" (Stafford 150). By hearing others discuss her personal aptitude, she is deeply touched. However, it is important to

note that it is Wentworth who proclaims it and this means something quite more. She actually has to recover by just hearing him speak her name. Until this point, they have existed only in politeness and "a perpetual estrangement" (Austen 55). No longer are these two former lovers distant while in close proximity, no longer do they avoid too much conversation or eye contact. This welcomed moment takes her by surprise and she must gather her own composure before entering the room to come face to face with the man of her sole affection. Again, we find Wentworth's "glow" much like the impassioned "glowing" aforementioned when Anne projected her feelings on a seemingly apathetic person. Here, we now discover the glow to be exuding from him and his passionate feelings revealed. Anne knows a look "she cannot be insensitive of" and loses the composure she gains on the stairs. Wentworth, for his part, also has to gather himself. What is interesting is Austen's use of the word "recollect" as if to imply Wentworth has been collecting himself for some disclosed period amount of time. It certainly can be argued he has displayed his attraction for Anne since earlier on their trip to Lyme when coming across Mr. Elliot. Although these two still remain polite and silent about their feelings for one another, their body language--eyes and facial expressions, express the repressed romantic desires the couple share. This verbal and physical acknowledgement from Wentworth directly contributes to Anne's movement from painful romantic feelings toward those of pleasure.

As close as the two seem to sharing their deepest feelings, Wentworth's are still not confirmed to Anne or the reader until they are all in Bath and he overhears the conversation between Anne and Captain Harville about the virtues of gender. Anne perpetually tries to read Wentworth's feelings about Louisa and his attachment to her, if

any. She requires this knowledge "and until that point were settled, she could not quite be herself" (144). There is, however, a passage where the engagement between Louisa and Captain Benwick is discussed that arguably spells out Wentworth's sentiments and his love for Anne. He explains, "A man like him, in his situation! With a heart pierced, wounded, almost broken! A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman!--He ought not--he does not" (148). Since it is simple to connect this declaration about Benwick to his own situation, he stops short, while once again Anne is rushed with many sensations. She is "struck, gratified, confused, and beginning to breath quick, and feel one hundred things in a moment." Wentworth fails to declare his love explicitly, however, Anne's bodily sensations confirms his feelings.

While also lending feminists their greatest support, our heroine feels the elation of

pleasure, Wentworth's proposal, in a moment where she least expects it--while conversing with Captain Harville about the virtues of men and women. As the two discuss love, constancy and the role of literature, their conversation is viewed as plainly feminist by critic Margaret Kirkham (Kirkham 147). She claims there is a male bias in literature and Austen is exacting a direct assault when Anne retorts:

"Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything" (Austen 188). This notion is echoed in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, when they question where the "explicitly patriarchal theory of literature leave literary women?" and further add how the pen is a "metaphorical penis" leaving women without the ability to write (Gilbert and Gubar 7). Sarah Emsley adds to this discussion

in her book *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*. She states that after Wentworth's pen falls down, it is Anne who "metaphorically [takes] the pen into her own hands just moments after" and this is to assert the "difference in constancy has to do with the presence of an 'object'"; that men have more to do in the world outside the domestic sphere than women (Emsley 154). Could the object implied be the phallic pen? In any case, she picks it up and does a re-narrating of her own story so that Wentworth might understand his misconceptions of her character and earlier refusal to his offer of marriage (Giordano 118). Simply put, she describes her feelings for him "as loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (Austen 189). The ending to this conversation is also the ending to Anne's physical and emotional pain and concludes in this second volume her progress from pain to pleasure.

While finally confessing their truest, most intimate of affections for one another, Wentworth asks about her potential engagement to her cousin, Mr. Elliot. The opening quote of this essay is her response. She reflects on her earlier submission to duty and expresses her reasoning. In being persuaded by Lady Russell at nineteen, she made the right decision for her "conscience" and explains to Wentworth how "a strong sense of duty is no part of a woman's portion" (198). By marrying Wentworth, Butler claims Anne is making a moral decision and not a feminist statement. She claims the choice between Mr. Elliot and Captain Wentworth is clear and by marrying Wentworth, the more fit gentleman to marry, gives a "moral colouring" (281). Essentially, she is arguing that Anne's decision to marry him is a moral decision, albeit no-brainer in terms of her choice, and not a feminist one. I argue the "duty violated" would have been a personal violation of moral duty and agree with Butler on these terms only. What the conservative

view lacks is the inherent sexualized narration and the clear fact that Anne claims love on her terms and this agency exerts independence from her ruling class. Although seemingly tame, Austen is aligned with Mary Wollstonecraft as she defends for her female character's ability to be as intelligent and rational as their male counterparts. In addition, Austen displays a new way to interpret love and marriage through Anne and Wentworth's reciprocated love and their hopeful marriage. By marrying in defiance of her aristocratic status and by highlighting her female sexuality through the narration of the text, Austen stresses female sexuality. This technique emphasizes and stresses the sexual politics of her time through her narrative style and sexually implicit language, placing her beyond Wollstonecraft's argument and in a more modern definition of feminism.

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VITA

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