



Jane Austen's WORLD

The Life and Times of England's Most Popular Author



Published to commemorate the
200th anniversary of *Pride and Prejudice*

MAGGIE LANE

DEDICATION

*To Peter Troy
who found out more about Jane Austen
than he ever thought he wanted to know*



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The Rights of Woman

OPPOSITE: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT BY JOHN OPIE, 1797.

THE ENLIGHTENED and rational nature of eighteenth-century thought was conducive to the first wave of feminism. For in a society where morals and manners are being debated as important issues, it was natural that certain intellectual women should seek a part in the debate and should question, in particular, why women should not be considered as fully rational beings, with the same moral stature as men.

These early “female philosophers” as they were then called, or feminists as we would term them today, were non-militant and concerned only with rooting out male prejudice by rational argument. They made no demands for legal or constitutional change in the status of women. What blue-stocking authors like Mary Astell, Lady Mary Chudleigh and Catherine Macaulay discussed in their essays and pamphlets were questions of female education, marriage, moral autonomy and authority

within the family. These are precisely the issues with which Jane Austen was to concern herself in her novels, which certainly, in their sympathetic portrayals of female lives, and claims for full moral stature in her female characters, bear a feminist reading. Meanwhile a more colourful and controversial figure had burst upon the feminist scene.

Mary Wollstonecraft

A teacher, novelist and outspoken polemical writer, who lived out her life in accordance with her unconventional principles, Mary Wollstonecraft did more for female emancipation in the long run than her more

ladylike predecessors. Yet she was also, unwittingly, the cause of a serious setback in the movement, from which it took a very long time to recover.

Her most famous work is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which was published in 1792, when Jane Austen was at the most impressionable age of sixteen, though we do not know whether a copy ever came her way. It seems unlikely that she could not have read it if she wished to, as she was a member of various book clubs and circulating libraries over the next few years.

A Vindication ... sums up the feminist ideas that had been developing over the century, and places them in the context of post-revolutionary Europe, in itself a dangerous ploy. By acknowledging her radical sympathies, the author risked alienating many, like Jane Austen herself, who would not otherwise fault her reasoning. The book emphasizes that reason and rational principle are the best guides to conduct in all human beings, male or female. It attacks male icons, particularly Milton and Rousseau, for advocating submission and weakness in women as a means of appealing to men. One of her main arguments is that the education girls receive equips them to attract husbands, but not to make good wives and mothers: “The civilized women of the 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.”

The 1798 controversy

Six years after the publication of *A Vindication* ... , Mary Wollstonecraft died in giving birth to her daughter Mary Godwin, who was to become the wife of the poet Shelley and author of *Frankenstein*.



THE ACTRESS MRS JORDAN, WHO DEPIED THE CONVENTIONS THAT RESTRICTED WOMEN'S PLACE IN SOCIETY.

A few months after her death, Mary Wollstonecraft's husband, the radical writer William Godwin, published a *Memoir* of her. With genuine respect for the truth, but foolish disregard for how the truth would be received, he revealed the so-called "irregularities" in his wife's life story: a love affair that resulted in the birth of an illegitimate child, suicide attempts, and the conception of their own child before marriage.

As a result, Mary Wollstonecraft was branded a whore and an atheist – Godwin had exaggerated her rejection of Christianity to suit his own views – and not only her own arguments discredited, but those of any other woman who dared to write on the subject, for it was argued they all wanted to overthrow the institutions of marriage and religion. It would be half a century before the feminist movement found its voice again.

Meanwhile, to add to their difficulties in trying to gain respect for their work in a male-dominated sphere, women writers of any kind, even those not addressing feminist issues, had to be more careful than ever to stress their respectable private lives, domestic virtues and ladylike credentials.

As part of the angry male response to Godwin's revelations, within the year the Reverend Richard Polwhele had published an anti-feminist satirical poem entitled *The Unsex'd Females*. He put forward the view that it was a sign of the corruption of the age that women's work should be considered on its merits, like men's. He described "the sparkle of confident intelligence" as, in itself, a proof of immodesty in a female author.

1798 was the year that, had the publisher Cadell accepted Mr Austen's offer of his daughter's manuscript the previous November, *First Impressions*, that most "light and bright and sparkling" of all novels, would have first appeared. Was there an element of relief in Jane Austen's natural disappointment? It would be five years before she would even attempt to sell any of her finished manuscripts again.

