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Women Owning Property: The Great Lady in Jane Austen

After commenting on an inheritance received by their wealthy uncle, Mr Leigh-Perrot, in a letter to Cassandra, in July 1808, Jane Austen writes: "Indeed, I do not know where we are to get our Legacy - but we will keep a sharp look-out" (Le Faye 143). Plainly aware of her and Cassandra's comparatively strained circumstances and of inequality not just within her own family but throughout society, Jane Austen reverses this disparity in her novels. Here, in her narrative economy, propertyless women are given a central position and propertied women become secondary characters. In contrast to the way Georgian genteel women have been represented by scholars of the period, the great ladies in Jane Austen are not portrayed as either creators of spaces, managers of their property, or socially conscientious members of their community. Instead, they share various negative characteristics, with most of them being described as despotic and arrogant. The exception to this is the heroine of *Emma*, in which the future proprietor is central to the narrative. Presented as a potentially tyrannical great lady who does not contribute to the improvement of her community, Emma must reform herself in order to escape this destiny.

While critics including Elsie B. Michie have suggested that through the juxtaposition of wealthy women with the unpropertied heroines Austen invites her readers to value poverty over wealth, Austen depicts wealth and influence as desirable, but as something wasted in the hands of those who do not possess the appropriate education and moral principles prerequisite to their using it wisely. By refuting the idea that during the Georgian period women would not have been expected to manage their property - a position maintained by authors such as Sandie Byrne and Gillian Skinner - Austen does not, as a rule, characterise the great ladies in her novels as property managers, not because this would have been inconceivable but because their education has not prepared them for it.

Indeed, Austen was critical of the faulty female education that made women incapable of undertaking the challenging task of managing property and she regarded the novel as a means of educating women in ways that will qualify them to do this successfully. In this respect, *Emma* is particularly significant, as the process by which Emma will become a responsible manager - and, after the death of her father - owner of property, is conceivable in this sense as an education that has ethical forms of ownership in view.

1. The Great Lady

According to Amanda Vickery in *Behind Closed Doors*, during the Georgian period, heiresses and widows were common amongst the nobility, where as many as a third of all family seats came to women or passed down the female line (132). In *Women in England* Susie Steinbach supports this and successfully demonstrates the active role these women played in the management of the household and within their communities. Contradicting the stereotype of the languid great lady, this author argues that no aristocratic household would have been left entirely to the staff. Amongst other managerial tasks, the mistress of the house would have met daily with the housekeeper, kept the household accounts, paid bills, ordered food and other supplies and overseen the planning of events when the family entertained. Vickery also explores the ways in which women would have contributed to the decoration and shaping of the interior of the house, in spite of the limitations in the law, which denied married women the right to own their own property.

As pointed out by Anne Laurence in *Women in England 1500-1760*, few could have afforded to commission architectural projects at their own expense, since the funds would not have been at their disposal (153). In spite of this, widowhood, which ended a woman's coverture in common law and restored her full legal personality, would have been, when combined with prosperity, a period of independence and self-expression for women, according to Vickery (220). This is precisely the situation in which many great ladies in Jane Austen find themselves. However, the connection to a grand domestic space actually works against these women's subjectivity in the novels. Privileged in their social standing and financial situation, these women are only secondary characters, whilst the unpropertied women are given central positions in the narrative.

In *The One Vs. The Many*, Alex Woloch draws attention to the social inequality and the imbalance in Austen's narratives, where privileged women such as Anne de Bourgh, Lady Catherine's daughter, who will inherit "very extensive property" are much "better off than [the] many girls with none" (60). Whereas the heroines are portrayed as possessing moral qualities that would have made them conscientious property managers, the great ladies share strikingly similar characteristics that, taken together, create a negative and unsympathetic portrait of women who inherit substantial property. The injustice of the inequality prevalent in society is thus evidenced by the indications presented throughout the narratives suggesting that the heroines would have made much better use of the property had they been granted the same opportunities and privileges as the propertied women.

Added to the general negative portrayal of the personalities and morals of the great ladies is the fact that Austen does not characterise them as active managers of their property. This is in

contrast to the historical cases made by Vickery, Steinbach and Laurence that demonstrate that such women frequently were active in this role. What are we to make of this generally negative characterisation of wealthy and propertied women and its contrast to the positive light in which heroines far less privileged are placed? *In The Vulgar Question of Money*, Michie argues that Austen sees the plots of her novels as a means through which “fiction attempts to counter worldly assumptions by leading readers to value virtue and poverty over wealth” (57). She goes on:

In the looking-glass logic of Austen’s world, to have nothing that would make you desirable on the marriage market, to lack fashionable manners and the rank and possessions that accompany them, is, in fact, to have everything, to possess the value or virtue, the good manners, that will protect you from the corruptions of wealth (39).

Here Michie suggests that Austen criticises wealth and exposes its corruptive force in their virtues and manners, while at the same time inviting her readers to value poverty. However, nowhere in her novels does Austen romanticise poverty or present it as an indicator of virtue. In fact, there are several examples in Austen where the morally reprehensible actions of a character are presented as understandable when motivated by poverty or fear of poverty. Mrs Smith from *Persuasion* would be an example of this, as her desperate situation of poverty and illness leads her to manipulate Anne and encourage a marriage that would be potentially beneficial to her but disastrous to her friend. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Bennet’s attempts at coercing Elizabeth into marrying Mr Collins, unlike any manipulation of the sort exerted by the great ladies, is not [entirely] condemned, as Mrs Bennet’s fear of poverty is the reason behind her objectionable behaviour.

While some authors such as Gillian Skinner and Sandie Byrne have argued that women in the Georgian period would not have been expected to manage their own property, other authors have shown that the limits on active management were not so stringent. In fact, we see various examples of women throughout the early modern to the Georgian period who were responsible for commissioning building works in estates either owned by themselves or their husbands. Laurence, for instance, calls attention to the fact that most husbands appointed their wives as executors of their wills and that if a man died intestate his widow was almost always appointed as the administrator of his estate (235). This disproves the idea that women managing property would have been considered anomalous. *In Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History* in, Susie Steinbach also points out that great ladies would have been expected to undertake important responsibilities as patrons of parish churches and philanthropists (89).

It is curious to notice, therefore, that having been in the position to portray female agency and philanthropic work, which she is sure to have witnessed, Austen neglected to account for the duties of great ladies in positive and productive terms. As Michie argues, “rich women [in Austen’s novels] exhibit engrossment, while rich men demonstrate that it is possible to be both wealthy and virtuous” (30). However, while Michie affirms that the rich woman in Austen represents “the material appeals that threaten to corrupt the moral sentiments,” Austen’s portrayal of the great ladies is more complex than this (30). The overall negative portrayal of propertied women in Austen contrasts with the various examples of women who are either capable property managers or have the potential to become so, with household management not being presented as something gendered. In fact, the main reason for the differences between these two sets of characters is illustrated in an excerpt of Fanny Burney’s *Cecilia*, familiar to Austen, in which the heroine’s household management is described: “The system of her œconomy, like that of her liberality, was formed by rules of reason” (792). The explanation behind the competence of some characters in the administration of the household would be, therefore, the use of reason in the performance of their duties. In Austen, whenever rationality is lacking, it is presented as an indicator of a deficient education that did not prepare the propertied women for their roles.

2. Education

Mary Wollstonecraft famously argued that traditionally female qualities were not natural but constructed, the result of a limited education. In *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with Suggestions for its Improvement*, Priscilla Wakefield is just as critical of female education when she denounces the faults which prevent women from becoming useful members of society. Arguing that women must be provided with a suitable preparation that allows them to understand their duties and discharge them suitably, these authors defend a revolution in female education that would teach women to become useful members of society. In her novels, Austen contributes to this feminist dialogue on female education by contrasting the consequences of an inadequate upbringing with those of a suitable one. Austen is positive about heroines and other female characters who are well educated, either showing examples of their abilities in household management or indicating that they have the potential to successfully discharge these duties when they marry, such as Anne from *Persuasion* and Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice* respectively. These characters are contrasted to those of the great ladies who, through their actions, reveal the consequences of their faulty education: their pride, insolence and disrespect for those of lower rank and fortune. Wary of wealth and

influence being wasted in the hands of women who do not use it in order to improve their communities, but for their own selfish purposes, Austen uses these characters to represent the current system of female education which does not teach women to be rational beings and useful members of society.

Ignorance of their duties and disrespect towards people of lower ranks in society are qualities almost all of Austen's great ladies share. One of the best examples of this is Lady Catherine. This great lady's treatment of her guests when they arrive at Rosings is clearly deliberate and meant as an assertion of her superiority of rank. It is also illustrative of a lack of the good manners and social conscience which should belong to a lady of her position. The episode in which Anne forces Charlotte to stand in the strong wind to speak to her, instead of entering the house, proves her to be her mother's equal in lack of consideration towards people of a lower rank in society. Of a sickly constitution - which may be an excuse for her complete avoidance of responsibility - she does not appear to be educated on how to administer Rosings once it is in her possession. Given her own ignorance of her responsibilities as mistress of a great estate, Lady Catherine is unfit to educate her daughter in these matters. This is evidenced by the description of her discharge of her philanthropic duties, which is extremely ironic:

Elizabeth soon perceived...this great lady...was a most active magistrate in her own parish, the minutest concerns of which were carried to her by Mr Collins; and whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into plenty (*Pride and Prejudice* 143).

As this indicates, in the discharge of her duty, Lady Catherine is neither charitable nor understanding, but only authoritative and condescending, as her approach consists on commanding those less fortunate to be silent and content. There is no indication that this great lady contributes to the improvement of the lives of the poor with either useful advice or financial help, which indicates that these visits are not done out of genuine concern but out of a necessity to display her superiority of rank.

This lack of awareness of their duties is a common characteristic amongst the great ladies in Austen's novels. Mrs Ferrars, in *Sense and Sensibility*, is far from being active in her community, as she resides permanently in London and regards her estate merely as a means of income and of manipulating her eldest son into obeying her wishes. In fact, the only episode in which the estate is mentioned by her is during her attempt at persuading Edward to give up his engagement to Lucy

Steele and marry Miss Morton, in which it is used as a bribe: “His mother explained to him her liberal designs, in case of his marrying Miss Morton; told him she would settle on him the Norfolk estate” (200). Her administration of her estate and income is never mentioned, except when her daughter describes her reluctance to pay annuities to her former servants: “Her income was not her own, she said, with such perpetual claims on it; and it was the more unkind in my father, because, otherwise, the money would have been entirely at my mother’s disposal” (7). Whereas maintaining former servants would have been considered part of the responsibilities of the mistress of the house, Mrs Ferrars only discharges annuities to the three servants because it was stipulated in her husband’s will, making it perfectly clear that had the choice been hers this duty would have been left unperformed. Similarly, in *Sanditon*, the only instances in which Lady Denham is seen describing her management of the estate are used merely as the means of illustrating that lady’s avarice, as she is shown to be concerned about the prospect of a rise in the price of butcher’s meat due to the fact that she has “a servants’ hall full to feed” (181). The fact that her avarice makes her an unfair mistress is expressed by the declaration of her refusal to accommodate her relatives in her house, since if the servants had more work “they would want higher wages” (188).

Deficient education, both moral and practical, is contrasted, in Austen, with the superior upbringing of other characters. In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, it is indicated that Catherine received lessons on Arithmetic from her father, whilst there is no indication that the propertied women received any such education. The two exceptions to this are Emma and Lady Russell, as the narrative more or less indirectly points towards the fact that they would have been educated in these subjects. Whereas Emma must have a fair knowledge of Arithmetic in order to manage the estate by herself, we are informed that Lady Russell, in order to advise Sir Walter on how to best manage his estate, “drew up plans of economy [and]...made exact calculations” (*Persuasion* 13), revealing her knowledge on the subject. In spite of their other flaws, the portrayal of these two characters is, in contrast to that of other great ladies, a generally positive one, connected in Austen’s terms to their superior education. Thus, the propertied woman in Austen is not avaricious and morally reprehensible because she is a woman, but because she received a deficient education that weakened her mind and made her fully unprepared for her role, especially when compared to her male counterparts. For that reason, while most propertied men in Austen - those who have received both a practical and moral education - are both wealthy and well-principled, as Michie affirms, the faults of the women with property are presented as the natural consequences of an inadequate upbringing.

Another common characteristic amongst the great ladies in Austen is their propensity to tyrannise their dependents or people of lower ranks in society, treating the first as assets in social

advancement and the latter as instruments for their amusement, another consequence of their faulty education. When a woman becomes the leader of the family in Austen, it is her responsibility to manage the various economic pressures at its centre, her failure in this task becoming another way for Austen to expose the deficiencies of women's education. Mary Wollstonecraft warned against the prejudices that women possessed naturally weaker minds than men, often presented as a justification for their submissive position in the family. According to Wollstonecraft, women's experience of being tyrannised and forced into submission would lead them to, in return, tyrannise those dependant on them.

Originating from a deficient education which weakened their judgment and reason, most of the great ladies in Austen show this willingness to tyrannise, as they attempt to satisfy their insecurities by constantly asserting the power fortune and rank give them. Lady Denham's heir allows her the liberty of selecting a wealthy wife for him, regarding it as the price for the inheritance he expects her to leave him. Lady Catherine also appears to be convinced that she is entitled to manipulate marriages in order to better her daughter's status in society and consequently that of the de Bourgh family. Mrs Ferrars has the authority to decide when or if her son Edward will inherit and uses this power in an attempt to force him to marry who she pleases and choose his profession, disinheriting him when he opposes these plans. Rather than contributing to the improvement of their community, these women use their position in the family and in society to pursue their own selfish interests. Thus, Austen's characterisation of the great ladies does not merely present wealth and rank as something negative or necessarily corruptive, but demonstrates how empty and worthless these privileges are when not accompanied by the moral education and practical preparation that would allow these women to make good use of them.

3. Emma

Emma is the only Jane Austen novel in which a widowed or unmarried great lady of property does not feature, which means that the position of the two-dimensional character of the great lady appears to be left unfulfilled. However, in contrast with her former novels, in *Emma*, Jane Austen focuses on the figure of the female proprietor and places her at the centre of the narrative. Emma, the heroine of the novel, will inherit half of her father's property when he dies, property which, if protected by a trust, would be separate from that of her future husband. In this novel, Austen accompanies Emma's personal development, which may either be satisfactory, turning her into a positive influence in her community, or unsatisfactory, confirming the possibility that she will

become the sort of powerful single woman who does not belong to her community, much like the great ladies discussed in the previous sections.

As a literary character, the lack of a positive and moralising process of personal development in Emma would make her fade from view and join the other less visible female characters of great wealth and little education. As Woloch affirms, “Power is earned through attention” (60) and, as the main character, Emma is in a position more privileged than any other Austen great lady. According to Frances Ferguson, it is through free indirect speech that Austen brings us much closer to this character than to any other in the novel (529). By doing so, the reader has access to Emma’s thoughts and feelings, her qualities and faults, which altogether make her a complex character and, ultimately, a likeable one. As the primary character, Emma undergoes a process of personal development similar to that of other Austen heroines but unlike anything the other great ladies experience.

Emma loves and actively pursues matchmaking, an inclination which stems out of boredom and lack of occupation, and a sign of the futile lifestyle she will have to abandon in order to become a useful member of her community. Out of all the great ladies in Austen’s novels, Emma is the only one who is involved in the concerns of the parish church of her community and in the philanthropic work which was considered to be part of the responsibilities of the mistress of a big house. Episodes in the novel describe Emma as a compassionate and considerate leader in her community, who contributes with money, food and advice to the wellbeing of the poor. Nevertheless, and in spite of her potential to become an improver of her community, various factors keep her from realising it. Indeed, Emma is not just guilty of possessing prejudices towards people of lower social classes, but she also reveals a lack of fortitude in her charity work, avoiding it when possible.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asked for “a revolution in female manners” which would restore to women “their lost dignity” and allow them to “labour by reforming themselves to reform the world.” Aware of the need for such a reform in women’s education, through which women would receive the necessary preparation to successfully help and educate others in return, Austen understands the importance the novelist can have in this process. Seeing the novel as a form of education, Austen denounces the faults of women’s current education and places the heroine’s process of personal growth and reform at the centre of the narrative. Whereas all of Austen’s heroines undergo this process, in no other novel is the outcome so uncertain as in *Emma*. In this novel, the faults in the heroine’s education combined with her extremely privileged social position threaten to turn her into another of Austen’s tyrannical great ladies who does not organically belong to her community. By writing stories that educate women in ways that will qualify them to be property owners and managers, Austen does her part in this revolution of

female manners. In this context, the representation of philanthropic work becomes essential in Emma, as the more the heroine understands its indispensable nature, the more prepared she is shown to be for her position as a leader in her community.

Unlike the other great ladies, Emma received a good education from her governess Miss Taylor, through which she has developed qualities that fit her to become a capable property manager. Mr Knightley himself, who is not blind to the heroine's faults, recognises that the values fostered by Miss Taylor are precisely what, combined with a strong mind, make Emma a good person: "Nature gave you understanding: - Miss Taylor gave you principles. You must have done well" (*Emma* 454). Nevertheless, Emma is often neglectful towards those who would benefit from her assistance, particularly Miss and Mrs Bates, who live in comparative poverty. Emma's refusal to perform demonstrations of solicitude towards the less fortunate families is presented in the novel as something morally wrong and socially irresponsible. Revealing of the faults in her education, this lack of social consciousness must be overcome in order for Emma to adopt an ethical form of ownership and become an improver of her community.

With impeccable morals, values and consideration for other people, Mr Knightley leads by example in his own community, which makes him the ideal person to instruct Emma on how to undertake the same responsibilities. Demonstrative of Emma's lack of consideration towards those less privileged at its most extreme, her humiliation of Miss Bates at the Box Hill picnic earns her the reproof Mr Knightley. This becomes the most important moment in Emma's process of personal growth. After a second humbling moment in which she regrets the arrogance and conceit that has led her to manipulate Harriet, Emma will be ready to become an active and useful member of her community, embodying an alternative mode to female property management. In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Butler declares that "At the personal level marriage would mean submitting to continued moral assessment by a mature man, who would fortify the stronger, more rational, objective, and stringent side of Emma's mind" (252). Unlike Butler, however, I do not view Mr Knightley's mentoring as a patronising condescension of a man towards a younger woman, but a means for Emma to access and engage with the aspects missing from her education. Throughout the novel, both characters go through a process of personal growth and at the end of it they admit to their moral failures, with Mr Knightley not being presented as morally superior to Emma.

The description of Emma's visit to Donwell becomes essential to the understanding of her process of personal development since, in the same way that Elizabeth admires Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, Emma explores Mr Knightley's estate, approving of everything about it from its tasteful style of decoration to its considerable dimensions, with the estate being presented as the place in which Emma belongs. Mr Knightley's particular way of managing Donwell is the reason why

Emma must develop a social conscience before she can truly belong there. In fact, Donwell is described as an estate in which the source of its prosperity is not hidden, and as a living, growing environment where a relationship of interdependence is established between the owner, Mr Knightley, and his tenants, whose involvement is solicited and welcomed.

By the end of her process of personal growth, Emma has been saved from the destiny of becoming a tyrannical great lady and has shown that she can organically belong to her community and become involved in managing a large estate. Having freed herself from prejudices and learnt to respect people of different ranks in society, she has become the socially conscious mistress that the wife of Mr Knightley and the mistress of Donwell needs to be. Her happiness secured, we are not meant to doubt that Emma will, after the imminent death of her father, contribute to the maintenance of the respectability and prosperity of Donwell and be a competent manager of her estate and an improver of her community.

At the end of the novel, the danger that Emma may join the morally reprehensible great ladies is no longer a reality. As the central character, Emma goes through a process of personal development which ultimately prepares her for the position of an active member in her community and manager of a large estate. This process, combined with her superior education, saves her from the fate of the other great ladies, who are used as plot devices in order to move the heroine's story further but in whose own story the narrator is not interested. Having gone through a similar process of personal development as those of the other Austen heroines, Emma is allowed, at the end of the narrative, to share the same happy ending, which is intimately connected with the new property in which she has been shown to belong.

In *Emma*, Austen shows that being a woman is no impediment to successful property management, but that the key lies in the appropriate practical and moral education which so many women are denied. The unsatisfactory property management of the other great ladies, therefore, is presented in the novels as a consequence of a deficient education that did not prepare these women for roles of such great responsibility. Austen's portrayal in her novels of the consequences of a faulty system of female education illustrates the influence that contemporary female authors writing about education had on her. Lady Catherine, Mrs Ferrars and Lady Denham are portrayed as inactive and ignorant as far as the practical management of property is concerned due to their lack of knowledge of Arithmetic and Business that authors such as Wakefield, Edgeworth and West considered essential. By exposing these characters' arrogance and willingness to tyrannise, Austen also demonstrates her accordance with Wollstonecraft's argument that the current system of female education weakens women's minds.

A further important flaw in the management of Lady Catherine, Mrs Ferrars and Lady Denham is their lack of a social consciousness, avarice and reluctance to perform the charitable acts so highly praised by the previously mentioned authors. Due to their lack of an appropriate education and guidance, by the end of the novels these great ladies are just as ignorant of their duties as property owners and managers as they were at the beginning. Whereas Emma avoids doing charitable work whenever it proves inconvenient, she eventually comes to understand the importance of her role as mistress of a large estate and reveals her capacity to improve herself for the benefit of those less fortunate. Her capacity to emancipate her mind and overcome her initial selfishness distinguishes her from the other three great ladies, whose self-centredness remains unabated. Emma's emancipation is facilitated by the close friendship and trust subsisting between herself and Mr Knightley who, having enjoyed the benefits of an appropriate education, is willing to communicate it to Emma's advantage. Thus, through her novels, Austen offers a non-prescriptive perspective into what she considers to be the flaws in the education of women, as well as potential alternatives. In doing so, she not only engages with the dialogue on female education, but ultimately offers her own contribution to its reform.

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