The Subversive Female Stock Character in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

Rebecca J. Swaney is a senior English major with a minor in Art History. She also volunteers with the Mayor’s Literacy Commission.

This essay was for the class “Sense and Sensibility: Art & Design in the Age of Jane Austen,” as taught by Prof. Molly Lindner. This assignment was to write a research paper that corresponded with the course, choosing any piece of writing by Jane Austen as the subject.

*Pride and Prejudice* certainly maintains a center spot light; but resulting from specific societal expectations and demands on Austen’s womanhood, Austen makes subversive use of literary techniques. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen makes use of female stock characters to develop and express social criticisms without opening herself to public ridicule or even ruin.

According to the *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* by Ross Murfin and Supryia Ray, a stock character is “A type of character who regularly appears in certain literary forms. The audience or reader ascribes certain characteristics to such a character by virtue of convention — perceptions held in common by a cultural community. Stock characters are often, but not always, stereotyped or flat types or caricatures drawn simply and defined by a single idea of quality” (377 – 78). The stock character is a minor player that receives little development, at times relying entirely upon the reader’s interpretation, and often exists as a device to push the story forward. Austen was by no means the first author to make use of the stock character, but as a female author the reader must consider both her placement in a masculine literary tradition, and the masculine tradition and a masculine culture that affected her as an author. Otherwise, how does a woman write within a gendered literary tradition, language, and society, which does not favor her sex? During the 19th century, Austen’s influences of the western literary tradition would have largely been masculine focused. While there were certainly female writers (particularly contemporaries), literature would be defined by canonical males ranging from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Fielding to Sterne. Austen, focusing her novels on women and in the female realm, represents a radical venture in and of itself. In Austen’s final novel *Persuasion*, published posthumously, the heroine Anne Elliot argues: “Men have had every advantage of us [women] in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.”

Jane Austen came into her writing during a turbulent period marked by radical social and political change. The Enlightenment philosophy reflected on man’s position in the world, and a new breed of feminists posed the question of whether or not women were even considered human. The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution created landmarks in history that would forever change the socio-economic landscape. Literature changed, as well, in both format and themes, and the early 19th century continued to explore and expand the concept of the modern novel. Considering the monumental changes occurring in the Neoclassical period, Austen certainly could not escape the influence of the world around her; however, Austen’s novels tend to read as romantic, sentimental, and aesthetic pleasures that embrace the whimsical nature of companionate marriage, but seem to afford little serious cultural commentary. The inescapable and palpable theme of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*...
(1221). While Austen did not represent the woman's realm in literature alone, Austen certainly has had the greatest lasting qualities of her contemporaries.

_Pride and Prejudice_, originally titled _First Impressions_, was drafted between 1796 and 1797; and after revisions and the search for a second publisher, the novel would finally appear in print more than fifteen years later on January 28, 1813 (Hughes-Hallett 17). When Austen was writing, she would have been the same age as her heroine Elizabeth Bennet (Myer 161). For the casual reader, Austen's early novel seldom appears as a serious social commentary. She certainly comments on the looming predicament of five sisters without dowries and the novel concludes on the dangerous note of female sexual promiscuity. However, Austen's gender and social critiques within the novel read discreetly and moderately, if not even conservatively. Alison G. Solloway argues in _Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood_ that "As rationally educated women struggled by various means in public and private to be permitted to apply the fruits of the Enlightenment even marginally to themselves, a predictable hostility emerged toward women in general and women writers in particular, and they were subjected to fierce criticism" (5). Considering the "hostility" directed at women, it becomes pertinent for the reader to ask: How does Austen write in this social environment? A notably more aggressive female social critic of the 19th Century was Mary Wollstonecraft, who published _A Vindication of the Rights of Woman_ in 1791 – at least five years prior to Austen writing _First Impressions_ (Wollstonecraft ix). Wollstonecraft's essay provides a scathing response to the idea that women had inferior minds and should not receive anything beyond basic education. Additionally, she argues that women who were taught to be stupid and inferior would "want of cultivation of mind" (121). However, Wollstonecraft's boldness and outspokenness rewarded her with profound public disgrace, and she and other feminist writers were met with "mindless drubbing," "rage," and "condescension" (Solloway 5).

This public reaction showed other female contemporaries the danger in being explicit. This social unacceptance of the female opinion combined with Austen's background – a daughter from a clerical family, refused access to advanced education based on her sex per the social customs of the era, and dependent on the kindness of her male family members – resulted in Austen embracing indirect speech through parallel, juxtaposition, and satire. Solloway even concludes that the title change of Austen's novel reflects burgeoning Neoclassical feminist ideology as "pride" and "prejudice" had become code-nouns identifying masculine "pride" and "prejudice" specifically directed at women (8). Austen's prudent use of the stock character allows for a plethora of explorative methods and calculated ambiguity, which includes teasing certain ideals of "inappropriate" womanhood, exploring her own position as a woman, and allowing for a lively sense of polite truth. Perhaps Austen summarizes the reason for her ambiguity best in her 1817 novel _Northanger Abbey_: “A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can” (1165).

The importance of the stock character hinges on this culturally imposed restraint of the writer. Because of limitations imposed by a gendered society, the stock character plays a crucial role through juxtaposing the author’s true theme and often through contrast with the more developed heroine. Marilyn Butler addresses this in _Jane Austen and the War of Ideas_ when she explains, “Because women are strangers in a strange land, where language and literary forms have been pre-empted by men, there must be a special doubleness or indirectness in women’s writing” (xxix). The stock character allows the writer conveniently to relay cultural information and provides humor, drama, and tension; but the stock character also exists as a device of the unspoken where the enabled author can, in effect, present controversial opinions and themes without concretely identifying with these opinions. Otherwise, when wondering how women write in this period, the reader must consider what an author can say by not saying anything at all. The choice of silence on the author's part forces
the reader to interpret possible meanings. In The Myths of Motherhood, Shari L. Thurer provides a feminist critique when she states, “Women authors ... have had to use subversive strategies to inscribe their subjectivity into what is a ‘male’ narrative frame. Because the traditional narrative structure is unwelcoming to the female experience, women have been forced to devise creative and unconventional ways to tell their stories. To recover an author’s subjectivity, the reader must read subversively, that is, attend to silence and absences, the unspoken and encoded...” (207). Austen’s use of stock characters such as the ferocious female, female fool, and feminist philosopher provides an adaptation that addresses Austen’s need for subtlety and subversiveness. Butler describes the “author-reader relationship” that develops to elicit specific responses, “which are often exceedingly subtle” (18).

The ferocious female or man-woman or masculine woman (as this stock character has assumed all of these names and more) has a great time span of literary association. I discovered this character through Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady, written in 1748. This epistolary style novel, one of Austen’s favorites, explores thematic relationships of youth and adults, as well as men and women. In Clarissa, Miss Howe writes to Miss Clarissa:

I do assure you, my dear, were I a man, and a man who loved my quiet, I would not have one of these managing wives on any consideration. I would make it a matter of serious inquiry beforehand, whether my mistress’s qualifications, if I heard she was notable, were masculine or feminine ones. ... Indeed, my dear, I do not think a man-woman a pretty character at all; and as I said, were I a man I would sooner choose a dove, though it were fit for nothing but ... to go tame about house, and breed, than a wife that is setting at work” (118).

Likewise, Mary Wollstonecraft refers to “masculine women” (3) in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. This character embodies traditional male qualities, including aggression and being opinionated, and often this character is represented as an older female (past her prime) who remained single, or whose children are adults. From Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, the reader’s first impressions of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a ferocious female, are of “a tall, large woman, with strongly-marked features, which might once have been handsome. Her air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank. She was not rendered formidable by silence; but whatever she said, was spoken in so authoritative a tone as marked her self-importance” (Austen, PP 299). The unlikeable Lady Catherine is cruel, superior, and callous; the reader associates her with an insulting and haughty demeanor that consistently batters the novel’s heroine. Johnson suggests that Lady Catherine is actually a “parody of male authority” (88). In addition, Butler accuses Austen of lacking “the woman mentor or authority figure” (xi) in her novels, and perhaps in an attempt to fill that role Austen leaves much to be desired from Lady Catherine. However, Lady Catherine also portrays the sole powerful female figure in Pride and Prejudice. While Lady Catherine sorely lacks the positive attributes of a mentor, the reader does find an independent, “sensible,” and “respectable” (Austen, PP 297) female, and the only woman who wields substantial power (that is, her properties at Rosings, etc.) in the novel. Lady Catherine’s unacceptable female behavior allows for the heroine’s independent sprouts to appear more wholesome and less radical. Austen disguises Lady Catherine behind conflated self-importance, which subtly deflects the reader away from the question of Lady Catherine’s independence. As a stock character, she provides entertainment, but she also frames a discussion on women’s independence.

Another stock character is the female fool, which most accurately describes the two youngest Bennet sisters: Lydia and Kitty. Butler identifies Austen’s use of the female fool in Pride and Prejudice:

Austen comes to represent women’s abilities and aspirations as they manifest themselves in speech, and the verbal characteristics of her heroines include some

The Subversive Female Stock Character
striking negations: restraint, deference, inarticulacy, an absence of reference to events, books, and ideas. The women she allows to speak out form the largest single group of her minor characters—her female fools (Butler xli).

Once again, a contrast exists between the heroine and the stock character: the female fool speaks out (and often foolishly) and the heroine speaks restrainedly. While Mr. Bennet damns all of his daughters as “silly and ignorant” (Austen, PP 212), by the end of Part One of the novel it becomes apparent to the reader that Lydia and Kitty only have concerns for dresses, balls, and men. Austen satirizes (and to some degree even condemns) the youngest daughters by their incessant chatter and gossip, and the entire family nears ruin as the result of Lydia’s affairs (and hasty marriage) with Wickham. Lydia, perhaps the more foolish of the two, is described as never hearing or seeing anything that did not suit her (Austen, PP 381). The female fool is the result of Wollstonecraft’s prophecy: “Women who are told from their infancy ... that a little knowledge of human weakness ... will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives” (9 – 10). An uncultivated mind, gloriously ironic in the age of Enlightenment, fosters lack of thought. While the foolish female glorifies ignorant women, it simultaneously presses the point that uneducated women will not automatically result in docile and obedient wives with lethargic minds. Austen does not state her purpose as directly as Wollstonecraft, but nonetheless Austen uses this stock character to emphasize the failure of strict schooling in the womanly arts. If you instruct a woman to pursue little education and to have no desire for intellectual achievement then one should not be surprised by the result of scores of Lydia and Kitty Bennet, and indeed Elizabeth Bennet warns her father of Lydia’s folly and the need to enforce some restraint (Austen, PP 402).

Perhaps the timeliest of Austen’s stock characters is her use of the feminist philosopher. The term “philosopher” served a specific etymological purpose in the Neoclassical period. Johnson quotes from Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah when she describes the definition as “people who without knowledge ‘entertain a high idea of their own superiority, from having the temerity to reject whatever has the sanction of experience, and common sense’” (11). The term feminist philosopher or feminist freak was a 19th century apparition closely modeled on Wollstonecraft. However, Johnson argues that Austen “declines to create a ridiculous female philosopher” (22), which rings quite untrue, as in Austen’s earliest work, Pride and Prejudice, the middle sister Mary seems to embody all the qualities designated to the philosopher. Mary Bennet admirably displays the traits tied to the feminist philosopher; early within the novel, Mr. Bennet describes rather cruelly his daughter Mary as “a young lady of deep reflection I know and read great books, and make extracts” (Austen, PP 213). Mary develops into a dual force in the novel, as her sermonizing and “unfeminine” manner (largely her lack of pursuit in finding a husband) designates her as the under appreciated and unnatural sister, it is her brief but pertinent dialogs that embody the essence of the story: “loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable – that one false step involves her in endless ruin” (Austen, PP 295). Qualities of the feminist freak or philosopher encapsulate a learned woman moralizing (or prophesizing), and this character ideally has a radical nature against which a more conservative, though still progressive, heroine can be compared favorably. Johnson states “...the freakish feminist actually frees the author to advance reformist positions about women through the back door” (20). Social truth and a lurking criticism that exists in every statement Mary makes, along with her moralizing prophecies, define the theme of the novel. However, Mary is painted with the brush of a feminist philosopher, and the reader easily interprets her sermonizing speeches as longwinded and embarrassingly funny. But if the reader succinctly pulls out the substance from Mary’s lectures, a fiercely accurate truth exists that condemns society’s gender double standards. Mingled with the literary purpose and in-
tent of the stock character, we must also examine the limitations that result from the use of stock characters. The stock character allows for Austen to address issues society (and herself) find disconcerting or uncomfortable. Austen manipulates the stock character to aptly portray what she cannot vocalize, but ultimately the stock character provides a stilted perspective that reflects the author’s limited voice. Regardless of Austen’s position in using the stock character, inevitably her novel *Pride and Prejudice* struggles through representing the repressed. Most obviously, the stock character is based on stereotypes, which can be interpreted (or misinterpreted) from Austen’s true intent. In fact, much 20th and 21st century criticisms of *Pride and Prejudice* seem mired on the point of what Austen is trying to say if she is indeed trying to say anything. Silloway even suggests that Austen’s satire and subtleties may have been just as difficult to interpret in the 19th century as they are now (27).

Austen’s subversive use of the stock character allowed her as an author to acknowledge her own reactions to these female roles and to provide discreet social criticism. By being subversive, Austen can represent multiple layers of interpretation through stock characters without opening herself to anti-feminist criticism. In Austen’s later works, the stock character is exchanged for greater and more dynamic character development. Even novels as early as *Emma*, published in 1816, pursue a greater wealth of development and depend less on cultural assumptions. In this manner, some of the stock characters of *Pride and Prejudice* become superfluous in Austen’s later works. Austen’s growth away from these unnecessary characters displays her growing talent as a technical writer moving away from her literary influences. One may even wonder if the elimination of the stock character in her later novels represents Austen’s own thoughts and reactions to women living outside of the assumed norm. The stock character provides a source of entertainment in the novel – and it seems *Pride and Prejudice* is by far the preferred work in Austen’s oeuvre – and allows Austen to safely comment on and work through gendered political ideas.

While Austen has an effective hand in her use of the stock character, the subversive tactics Austen embraced were likely the result of social limitations and expectations placed on her as a woman. Keeping the culturally imposed regulations in mind, Austen brilliantly manipulates and maneuvers commonalities in English literature. The stock character has always provided for a multi-layered interpretation, but what appears as a meek commentary develops into an intriguing disregard of acceptable female behaviors. *Pride and Prejudice* cannot read only as a sentimental and romantic novel as the reader must interpret Austen’s satire, wit, and pregnant pauses to understand what social commentary exists.
Works Cited


