



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Traballo de Fin de Grao

Jane Austen and the rights of women: The role of women in *Emma*

Autora: Patricia Vázquez Vázquez

Titor: J. Manuel Barbeito Varela

Curso 2018/2019

Traballo de Fin de Grao presentado na Facultade de Filoloxía da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela para a obtención do Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas



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A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to be 'Patricia', written over a horizontal line.

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Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2018/2019

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SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título: Jane Austen and the rights of women: The role of women in *Emma*.

Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

This essay will analyse the role of female characters in Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and explore the extent to which they represent the author's position with respect to the feminist ideas of the period.

The unusual amount of authority and power that some female characters display in *Emma* makes the analysis of J. Austen's attitude to the situation of women, as shown particularly in this novel, interesting. It is this empowering of some women in the novel that allows us to think about a connection between Jane Austen and the feminist defence of equal rights for both sexes.

The main aim of this project is to show to what extent the eighteenth century ideas about the rights of women influenced Jane Austen and her representation of women in *Emma*.

Method: Three steps will be taken. First of all, a close reading of the novel to analyse how female characters (specially the most powerful) behave and think, and what is their real position in the society presented in the world of the novel. When necessary they will be compared with female characters from other novels by Jane Austen. Then, taking this analysis into account, the context of the period will be studied and the main ideas about women in Austen's life will be examined to see if there is any connection between these ideas and the role played by the analysed female characters. Finally, critical essays about Austen's life and her relation with debates concerning the situation of women will be consulted to see what she knew about these debates and if she got involved in them or not.

Structure: The structure of this essay will be divided in six sections: 1) Introduction, 2) General context focused on the struggle for the rights of women in Austen's time, 3) Overview of Austen's life and her relation with feminism, 4) Analysis of female characters in *Emma*, 5) Analysis of the relation between the role of *Emma's* female characters and Austen's feminist ideas, and 6) Conclusion.

Santiago de Compostela, 05 de Novembro de 2018.



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1. Introduction

Society has been traditionally dominated by patriarchal rules. Women have been oppressed, considered inferior to men, and their roles in society have been limited. In the eighteenth century some women in England began to be conscious of their oppression and the defence of the rights of women started. Jane Austen lived between the eighteenth and nineteenth century and *Emma*, one of her most famous works, was published in 1815. This novel includes some female characters that have a certain kind of power and challenge the conventional patriarchal ideas about women.

The thesis of this TFG is that Austen's representation of women shows her defence of women's dignity. Though not a radical to the extent of proposing women's independence or a change in their economic situation, Austen defended their intellectual capacities and criticized women when they were not up to the standards of moral seriousness that made them worthy of respect.

The main aim of the project is to show to what extent the ideas of the eighteenth century movement for the rights of women influenced Jane Austen and her representation of women in *Emma*.

Three steps will be taken in order to prove my thesis and to achieve the previous aim. First of all, the context of the period will be studied and special attention will be paid to the main ideas about women in Austen's time. Then, critical works will be consulted to know about Austen's life and see what she knew about the ongoing fight for women's rights, her degree of involvement in it and her attitude towards it. I will afterwards analyse some of *Emma*'s female characters by making a close reading of the novel. I will study how these female characters behave and think, and what is their real position in the society

presented in the world of the novel. This will show what ideas Austen vindicated concerning the situation of women.

The main source of this TFG will be Jane Austen's novel *Emma*. For the study of the situation of women in Austen's time and the start of the struggle for their rights, works such as Smith's *Jane Austen and the drama of woman*, Monaghan's *Jane Austen in a social context*, Kirkham's *Jane Austen, feminism and fiction* or Todd's *Jane Austen in context* have been used. Besides, Laski's *Jane Austen and her world* and Chapman's *Jane Austen's letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, as well as critical accounts from Smith, Monaghan or Kirkham, have offered relevant information about Austen's life and her connection with the movement defending women's rights.

This essay is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the general context; it explains the social situation of women in the patriarchal society of the eighteenth century in England. In addition, it explores how the fight for the rights of women began, the main claims this movement defended and some of the women that were involved in it, paying special attention to Mary Wollstonecraft and her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Once this is explained, it focuses on the novel and the role this genre played in the development of this movement.

The second chapter deals with Austen's life and ideas, highlighting the instances that can connect her with the situation of women. It examines what she knew about the debates concerning women's rights by paying attention to some female writers involved in this movement that could have influenced her. In addition, the opinion of some critics about Austen's engagement in the fight for the rights of women is exposed, offering the possibility to contrast different views on this issue.

The third chapter focuses on the analysis of *Emma*'s main female characters. The study of Austen's representation of women in this novel will provide the final proof needed to know to what extent Austen defended women's rights and the degree of her involvement in that fight.

2. General context

2.1 The female situation in the eighteenth century

In the eighteenth-century England women were oppressed due to the prevailing patriarchal ideology that regarded them as inferior to men. Although this ideology is still present nowadays, the situation of women was then extremely more precarious. Different authors wrote about the oppression of women in the eighteenth century and in this section some of their ideas will be introduced. To begin with, I will follow LeRoy W. Smith to explain the organisation of that patriarchal society. As this author claims, patriarchy refers to "an ancient, universal and dominantly masculine society" (Smith, 1983, p. 9). According to this, men in the eighteenth century English society were the ones that exerted authority and leadership over women and, thus, decided which roles women would play. In fact, the only two functions they ascribed to females were those of mothers and wives (Smith, 1983, p. 12). This limitation has to do with patriarchal stereotypes of male and female personality. Females were expected to display "passivity, submissiveness, dependence, subjectivity, intuitiveness, sensibility, irrationality" or "emotionality", while men exhibited "aggressiveness, competitiveness, rationality, analytic ability, objectivity" or "emotional control" (Smith, 1983, p. 11). Being considered so dependent and inferior in comparison to men, women were relegated to

domestic areas. As Caloryn W. Korksmeyer (1992) explains, at that time there were different “spheres” of activity, having each sphere some virtues that should be attained (p. 287). Relegated to the domestic sphere, women were guided by a “rationally superior husband” and they were only allowed to take care of the children and the house (Korksmeyer, 1992, p. 287). Their main “virtues” were “kindness, humility, gentleness” or “protectiveness” (Korksmeyer, 1992, p. 287). David Monaghan corroborates this view. In line with Korksmeyer’s idea, Monaghan (1981) states that women were associated with home and domestic life, and always subordinated to their husbands (p. 106). He asserts that the most important virtue ascribed to females was “meekness”, since it entailed the “recognition of her inherent inferiority and suppression of whatever abilities she might possess” (Monaghan, 1981, p. 106). What all these authors make clear is that women in the eighteenth century lived in a patriarchal society where men were believed to be superior to women – both physically and intellectually. They had the power to define women and their situation in society, relegating them to the domestic sphere and limiting their actions to housework. The virtues that this society promoted in females and that credited them as good women wanted to make them submissive to men, and always their inferior.

Moreover, the kind of education offered to women made sure that they always remained in the shadow. As Gary Kelly (2005) explains, the education in the eighteenth century was “designed to fit the individual for a range of related roles in life, according to sex and rank” (p. 252). That being so, as females were considered inferior irrational creatures only able to take care of domestic duties, their education entailed “basic schooling, household management and religious instruction” (Kelly, 2005, p. 256). It is important to clarify that basic schooling comprised only learning to read, learning to write and basic mathematics, while men were learning more advanced skills according to their

rank. Furthermore, women were also trained in “accomplishments” by governesses or private tutors, but they only prepared them for their two roles in society. According to Kelly (2005), these accomplishments included skills like dancing, singing and playing music (aiming to attract a suitor); drawing, painting, modern languages and needlework (marking their cultural distinction); and letter-writing or knowledge of the “belles-lettres” (p. 257). Consequently, it can be seen that education played an important role in perpetuating patriarchal ideas. It limited women’s access to knowledge and made them only fit for domestic duties, which made women the inferior beings that the patriarchal society of the time believed them to be.

2.2 The start of the fight for women’s rights

In this context, it is important to highlight the work of some female voices who struggled to change women’s circumstances for the better. Figures such as Mary Astell, Lady Mary Chudleigh or Catherine Macaulay were involved in the fight for the improvement of women’s situation in society since the end of the seventeenth century. Astell wrote *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* in 1694. In this work she claimed that women were morally equal to men and that they could therefore make moral judgements. Chudleigh also defended this and, in addition, rejected that the idea that women should regard their husbands as gods (Kirkham, 1983, p. 9). Macaulay established the connection between women’s lack of “serious duties (other than first to captivate and then to please and obey their husbands) and their exclusion from political rights” (Kirkham, 1983, p. 11). She blamed inadequate education for the incapability of some women for self-government, and therefore for their inferiority to men. Thus, since this early period these women started to fight for the consideration of

women as rational creatures, which was something completely new for a society that considered them less intellectual than their male counterparts.

These women writers and the influence of the French Revolution fostered a movement that would open the path for the improvement of women's rights. The main principles that the French Revolution promoted were liberty, equality and fraternity. These ideas spread all throughout Europe and some people started to demand equality between the sexes rejecting the idea that women were inferior creatures. In England the "early feminist movement" started (Korksmeyer, 1992, p. 295). Korksmeyer (1992) points out that the feminist movement was founded on the idea "that women are innately as rational as men" and that they should therefore be treated as such (p. 295). Consequently, according to her, this movement demanded women's political and legal rights, freedom from the domestic sphere, and education (Korksmeyer, 1992, p. 290). Margaret Kirkham (1983) prefers to call it the "Enlightenment feminism", its essential claim being that "women, *not* having been denied powers of reason, must have the moral status appropriate to 'rational beings'" (p. 4). She maintains that the members of this movement believed that women's situation could be improved by increasing their rational understanding, which was related to their "demand for an adequate education" (Kirkham, 1983, p. 4). Educating women would be a "threat to the patriarchal basis of authority" that deprived them from any rational faculty (Kirkham, 1983, p. 4). In sum, this emancipatory movement had two main aims: first, the acknowledgement of the rational equality between the sexes and, second, the need for a proper education that enabled women to reach a moral status adequate to their rational condition.

However, this is not the only type of feminism. As it was previously explained, the early feminist movement was concerned with equality and was influenced by the principles promoted by the French Revolution. Accordingly, it was mainly focused on

political activism, on the fight against sexual discrimination, etc. In the twentieth century a new wave of the feminism insisted on feminine difference; equality is not sufficient. This later movement is more focused on defending that women (or men, if they write from a feminist perspective) can provide society with different views, different opinions, different types of works, etc. The two waves of feminism have thus different objectives and strategies. The struggle to conquer the aims of the first wave of feminism did not end when the other began: equality between the sexes has not been achieved yet and the fight for it must be still active. Nonetheless, what is important to bear in mind for the purpose of the present work is that the feminism of the eighteenth century England was one of equality. For this movement it was clear that women's role in society and their inferiority to men had nothing to do with their female nature, but with an environment that influenced and limited them. Therefore, it fought for the consideration of women as the natural equals to men.

2.3 Mary Wollstonecraft

Special attention must be paid to Mary Wollstonecraft, who fought fiercely for the rights of women in the eighteenth century and who is one of the founding figures of feminism. In this section, some of the ideas she defended will be outlined. First of all, the basis of her line of argument will be explained. As Korksmeyer (1992) notices, Wollstonecraft based her claims on two main ideas: the “refutation of (...) the ‘separation of virtues’ doctrine, then a popular belief that there is a difference between ‘male’ and ‘female’ virtues”, and the belief that “the theory of associated ideas for ‘nurture’ over ‘nature’” was “the cause of any deficiency found in the reasoning powers of females of the time” (p. 286). Basically, Wollstonecraft rejected the system that ascribed different virtues

according to sex. Her idea was that virtue was obtained through the use of reason, being reason a characteristic shared by all human beings. Thus, it was irrational to maintain a different type of virtue for women. Moreover, as it can be seen, Wollstonecraft believed that the inferior condition of women was no proof of the inferiority the patriarchal ideas attributed to them; rather, it was the result of “being excluded from positions which demanded the use of reason and moral responsibility” and of “being denied adequate education and experience” (Korksmeyer, 1992, p. 289). As Korksmeyer writes, women’s behaviour as superficial creatures was for Wollstonecraft the result of social circumstances, not part of their nature. Wollstonecraft thus placed the defence of the natural equality of both sexes as the grounding of all her demands.

Wollstonecraft not only denounced the oppression of women: she also promoted a change in the organisation of society. In Smith’s words (1983), what this writer intended was to urge “women to assert themselves, to demand equality with men” (p. 16). This is one of the reasons why she published one of her most famous, influential, and subversive works: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). According to Ann J. Lane (1992),

With the revolutionary spirit of the age came an optimistic faith in reason and progress and the capacity of human beings to change and to alter their environments. But humanity was an abstract ideal identified with men. Wollstonecraft took these new ideas of the rights of man, especially as articulated during the French Revolution, and claimed them for women as well (p. vii).

I will now explain some of the most relevant ideas of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*. In order to do so, the main work consulted will be Bergès’ *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. To begin with, as previously explained, Wollstonecraft defended that men and women were equal. In her *Vindication*

she insists on this point and refuses the separation of virtues. As she considered men and women as equals, she defended that the virtues valued in one sex should also be valued in the other. “Men too, she says, must be chaste and modest” (Bergès, 2013, p. 25). She thus fought for the need of equality between sexes even in the environments that were traditionally associated with women. Wollstonecraft defended that “men too have duties as parents they must fulfil” (Bergès, 2013, p. 25). As far as female education is concerned, she was against the idea that women should only be taught to please and not to think rationally, as men did. Wollstonecraft directly rejected accomplishments for women and she argued that they denied them “intellectual independence and moral self-discipline” (Kelly, 2005, p. 258). Another reason why she rejected them was because she believed that “a woman who has been taught to please, rather than think (...) is unfit to be either a wife or mother” (Bergès, 2013, p. 147). According to this, she denounced that female’s education was so poor that it even made them unfit to take care of children or the housework, their roles in society. Wollstonecraft clearly defended women’s right to be offered the same education as men. Finally, the *Vindication* rejected women’s limited role in society. As Bergès (2013) explains, “Wollstonecraft does not believe that women have a duty to get married or have children” (p. 146). She vindicated women’s right to be free to choose their role in society and, thus, promoted the idea that getting married or having children should be options, not obligations. She argued that “women should be able to enter into professions and support themselves without having to sell themselves to a husband in exchange for a roof over their head.” (Bergès, 2013, p. 146). By saying so, what she defended was women’s right to make a living, to reach economic independence. In sum, Wollstonecraft fought fiercely and openly for the rights of women in a period in which patriarchal values were the rule. With the publishing of her *Vindication*, she disregarded social conventions and encouraged society to regard women as men’s equals.

Due to the subversive ideas included in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, the relevance of this work concerning the women's fight against oppression cannot be denied. Wollstonecraft was influenced by authors such as Astell or Macaulay. Kirkham (1983) asserts, for instance, that Wollstonecraft's concerns and interests are the same as those of Mary Astell and that Wollstonecraft herself acknowledged Macaulay as her teacher (p. xi; p. 39). Furthermore, Bergès (2013) explains that "when Catherine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* was published in 1790, Wollstonecraft was very struck by the historian's sensible and radical approach to the question of women's education" and argues that this work clearly influenced her (p. 10). Nevertheless, until the publication of the *Vindication*, nobody had defended women's rights so directly and openly as Wollstonecraft did in this work. Although the mentioned writers influenced her, no one promoted ideas as radical and subversive as the ones she included in her *Vindication*. That being so, her *Vindication* can be taken as the start of the female's movement (Lane, 1992, p. vii) or even as "the earliest sustained philosophical argument for gender equality in English" (Bergès, 2013, p. x).

2.4 The relevance of the novel

In relation to this emerging consciousness of women's oppression, it is important to take into account the influence of the novel. The novel was a new genre that represented the world and its problems and opened a path for women writers to enter the literary world – a world traditionally reserved for men. While offering women the opportunity to do something outside their limited role in society, this genre allowed them to represent and question their social situation. As Smith (1983) points out,

The emergence in the eighteenth century of the novel offered women a means of dramatizing the actual circumstances of their existence through the projection of images in a 'fiction'. The most important result of this discovery was a general growth of female self-consciousness (p. 17).

For the first time, women's voices started to be heard and developed a critical vision of their own situation. Many of them were women eager to improve their social conditions. Thanks to the spread of other women's critical point of view, the ignorance of the females that were unaware of their restrained role in society started to fade away. As a result, women in the eighteenth century became more and more involved in the novel. The number of female readers, critics and authors increased in a considerable way. And, bearing in mind the precarious education offered to women – excluded from major schools or universities, the circulating libraries of that time offered them something like an "Open University", as Kirkham (1983) calls it (p. 14). This allowed women to "acquire public voice and the authority of moral teachers" (Kirkham, 1983, p. 14).

The literary production in England during the last years of the eighteenth century was almost dominated by women writers. I will now pay attention to the work of Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Smith or Elizabeth Inchbald, who created female characters that questioned the popular patriarchal ideas about women.

Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth were writers that represented women with rational powers. Burney, for instance, created heroines with sensibility, but also intelligence. As Kirkham states (1983), Burney's heroines "spend far too long exhausting themselves and the reader with displays of overwrought sensibility, but they are not altogether without spirit or intelligence" (p. 35). This writer thus challenged the belief that women had no intellectual capacities and questioned their alleged inferiority to men. Criticism regards Burney "as the first novelist to show life through a woman's eyes and

to dramatise her struggle.” (Smith, 1983, p. 21). In addition, Maria Edgeworth also defended rational powers in women. For instance, in her work *Belinda* (1801), she presented a female character, Lady Delacour, that seemed to intimidate her own husband with her intellectual powers, an absolutely subversive act in that period. For authors like Butler (1989), Edgeworth can be seen as “a dedicate portrayer of rational women” and a “reviser of her genre’s eighteenth-century codes” (p. xxxiv; p. xxxvi).

Charlotte Smith or Elizabeth Inchbald were even clearer in criticizing the situation of women. Not only did they create female characters with intellectual powers, but they also blamed women’s poor education for their exclusion from society and lack of significant ambitions. Smith’s *Emmeline* (1788) and *Desmond* (1792), protested against the exclusion of women from independent or active life, and blamed women’s position in society for their limited mental horizon (Steeves, 1973, p. 54 quoted by Smith, 1983, p. 22). Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791) denounced the poor education of women and showed how it was the lack of being taught to reason that led her heroine to the lack of serious interests and the inability to see the consequences of one’s own actions (Smith, 1983, p. 22).

The novel thus enabled women to represent society and their contemporary world from a critical point of view, producing an increasing conscience about the oppression they were suffering. It offered them the means to transmit some of the feminist ideas of the time, which would influence young women that were beginning to write – such as Jane Austen.

3. Overview of Austen's life and her attitude towards the writers concerned with the situation of women

3.1 *Life*

J. Austen was born on December 16th 1775, in Steventon (Hampshire, England). She was the youngest child, except for Charles John (born in 1779), of George Austen and Cassandra Leigh. Jane spent her childhood in Steventon, and her schooldays in Oxford and Reading. However, she started to be educated at home in 1786 or 1787 and, as it was common for a girl of her day, Jane “could read French easily and a little Italian, could play the piano and sing and dance, and was an excellent (...) embroideress” (Laski, 1969, p. 25).

Jane's father was a substantial classical scholar with an excellent library (Laski, 1969, p. 24). This offered Austen, an avid reader, the possibility to read and be acquainted with different authors and works of her time, thus connecting her with the literary situation of the eighteenth century. Laski (1969) emphasises that “all the family loved novels, and those, with other books, were read aloud in the evenings” (p. 25). Indeed, Austen herself acknowledges this in a letter to her sister Cassandra: “*our* family, (...) are great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so” (Chapman, 1979, p. 38). In a period in which the novel experienced an important expansion and most of them were written by women who fostered female self-consciousness about their situation, this love for novels could have influenced Austen's way of thinking concerning the role of women or their rights.

After several years in Steventon, she moved with her family to Bath when she was twenty-five years old. Kirkham (1983) believes that Austen enjoyed the time spent there, participating in social life and mixing with new people (p. 63). This is related to the fact that when the Austens moved there, Bath was experiencing a revival of its earlier social life. Furthermore, there were good bookshops and circulating libraries, which leads Kirkham (1983) to claim that “Jane Austen must have had access to virtually any author she wished to read and a quiet reading-room if she wanted it, since these were provided by the bigger libraries” (p. 64). Due to her love for novels, it was probable that Austen knew or read about some of the female writers that were dominating the English literary production of her time. At Bath this was even more likely. As Kirkham (1983) states, there is reason to suggest “that the period spent in Bath was of great importance in widening her intellectual and literary horizons, and in giving her greater independence in her choice of reading” (p. 60). In 1806, at the age of thirty, she left Bath with her family.

The last years of her life were a very active period of publishing. *Sense and Sensibility* was published in 1811, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, *Mansfield Park* in 1814, and *Emma* in 1815 (dated 1816); *Persuasion* was begun in 1815. Jane Austen died in 1817 and *Persuasion*, as well as *Northanger Abbey*, were published posthumously in 1817 (dated 1818). These works are the result of Austen’s life, the recollection of all her ideas and thoughts.

3.2 Jane Austen and some of her contemporary writers

As it has been previously explained, in the eighteenth century women developed a critical vision of their situation and many of them published books or novels with the aim of improving their social position. It is highly probable that Austen, an avid reader, knew

and read about some of the female writers of her time. There are proofs that she certainly read authors like Fanny Burney or Maria Edgeworth. Besides, although it cannot be known for sure, it is possible to claim that she also read Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald or even Mary Wollstonecraft. This section will show how these women may have influenced her.

First of all, some reasons why Austen could have read authors like Smith, Inchbald or Wollstonecraft will be explained. As Smith (1983) points out, it is probable that Austen read authors who dealt with the same issues that stimulated her own imaginative impulses, those related with the treatment of the women's subjects that fill her works (p. 22). Such subjects are "women's experience in the context of concern with the effects of social forms", "the young unmarried girlhood of a woman as the decisive years of her life", "women as interesting in themselves for their intelligence and affective qualities", "women's conventional education as a major cause of their ill preparation for marriage", etc. (Smith, 1983, p. 22). This is the reason why he maintains that Austen read Charlotte Smith or Elizabeth Inchbald's works, who also dealt with these issues (Smith, 1983, p. 22). In order to prove this idea, Smith highlights resemblances between Austen and these writers. He agrees with William Magee's judgement and defends that Charlotte Smith could have influenced Austen, for instance, in placing education as the major concern of her heroines (Magee, 1975, p. 130 quoted by Smith, 1983, p. 22). In addition, he explains that one of Inchbald's heroines, Miss Milner, resembles Emma Woodhouse (Austen's heroine), in that "both are trained by experience to be honest about their feelings" and that both reach an "enlightenment about themselves and others" (Bradbrook, 1967, pp. 110-112 quoted by Smith, 1983, p. 23).

It is also possible to argue that Austen could have read Wollstonecraft's works. In Kirkham's words (1983), "Jane Austen is in agreement with Wollstonecraft on so many

points that it seems unlikely she had not read *Vindication* and approved of much of it” (p. 34). In line with this, Smith (1983) goes so far as to state that “their views are often so nearly alike as to suggest a similar perception of the problems of women” (p. 23). For example, he argues that both question “popular assumptions about the ‘natural’ roles of each sex” and identify “education as the principal source of women’s inferiority to men” (Smith, 1983, p. 23). As a matter of fact, this author claims that the “cornerstone of change for both is the subversive idea that women are, or should be, rational beings and can be trained to think rationally” (Smith, 1983, p. 23).

Austen certainly read some of the works of Fanny Burney’s and Maria Edgeworth, two women writers that defended female’s rational powers. In 1798 “the name Miss J. Austen” was “on the subscription list for Fanny Burney’s *Camilla*, published in 1796” (Laski, 1969, p. 50). This means that with only twenty-three years old, Austen already knew Burney. Furthermore, having read Burney’s works, it is possible to suggest that Austen could have taken the title of *Pride and Prejudice* from the end of Burney’s *Camilla* where these words are repeated. Austen herself acknowledged in a letter to Anna Austen that she liked Maria Edgeworth’s novels as much as her own (Chapman, 1979, p. 405). She even praised *Belinda* in *Northanger Abbey*. In addition, when Austen published *Emma*, she sent a presentation copy to Maria Edgeworth (Laski, 1969, p. 105). This shows that Austen not only read and liked Edgeworth’s novels, but that she also respected her. As Kirkham (1983) states, Austen “admired Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, and regarded them as her teachers” (p. 34).

Austen was a writer aware of the fight for women’s rights and she became, to some extent, involved in the improvement of women’s situation. As mentioned above, she was educated in conventional feminine accomplishments. It is probable that this education offered her the idea that women were only able to take care of domestic duties.

Nevertheless, her readings gave Austen access to the ideas of authors such as the ones previously mentioned.

These writers questioned some of the conventional patriarchal ideas of their time – such as women’s lack of intellectual powers – and offered Austen a different perspective on the society in which she lived. By reading their works, Austen became aware of the rising consciousness of females in her time.

3.3 Jane Austen and the situation of women

Although Austen’s contact with writers concerned with the defence of women’s rights seems clear, the degree of her engagement in their fight is not so. Many critics have studied this issue paying attention to Austen’s works and the roles of female characters in them, and they have reached different conclusions. In this section, some of them will be shown. To begin with, attention will be paid to LeRoy Smith’s ideas. This author claims that, even though Austen was strongly concerned about women’s problems, she did not break with her society; her rebellion was limited (Smith, 1983, p. 25). Smith argues that Austen did not defend the need to act politically to change female’s situation. He differentiates Austen from Wollstonecraft, a woman who actually fought for the rights of women with her *Vindication*. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that Austen agreed with her in some aspects, particularly with the assertion that women are rational beings that need to be educated as such, an important tenet of the feminist fight of her time. According to Smith (1983), the main ideas Austen rejected are the different stereotypes ascribed to each sex, the assumption of women’s inferiority to men and women’s secondary status in society (p. 31).

However, as previously explained, this author also notices limitations in Austen's treatment of the situation of women. For instance, according to him, she showed little interest in women's access to the professions, did not struggle for the acquirement of women's rights, did not offer women alternatives to marriage and, instead, she represented a life without a man as "one of neglect and deprivation or as one of self-centred isolation" (Smith, 1983, p. 27). Thus, even though he argues that she rejected sex roles, he believes that she still limited women's possibilities of self-assertion and linked them irremediably to a man. His idea is that Austen did not promote a profound change in society, just a slight improvement in women's lives as individuals.

Other authors, such as Monaghan (1981), argue that "Jane Austen's disagreements with the prevailing attitudes of her time are fairly apparent." (p. 107). From his point of view, Austen was a writer that created women characters as intelligent and rational as men. Monaghan (1981) notices that her lovers, in the usual pedagogic relationship in which they are engaged, show women as well as male instructors, which proves Austen's belief on women's intelligence (p. 107). This critic goes so far as to claim that she showed that intellectual abilities were as desirable in men as in women, which he sees clearly represented in *Pride and Prejudice* (Monaghan, 1981, p. 107). Monaghan argues that Austen, above all, defended women's intellectual powers. For him, despite the popular ideas of the time, Austen regarded the education based in accomplishments as worthless (Monaghan, 1981, p. 108). According to this critic, "Almost all her heroines are deficient in the superficial virtues" and "Their education is complete [...] once they have corrected certain failings in judgement and/or feeling" (Monaghan, 1981, p. 108). Nevertheless, he does not stop there. Monaghan (1981) adds that Austen offered an alternative view of marriage too, one in which "the two parties operate on a basis of mutual respect." (p. 108). For this critic, she defended that wife and husband must respect each other, against

the mainstream idea that wives should be submissive to husbands and inferior to them. Moreover, he maintains that in *Mansfield Park*, for instance, “Jane Austen goes so far as to argue that meekness is a fault rather than a virtue.” (Monaghan, 1981, p. 109).

The limitation Monaghan (1981) notices in Austen’s defence of women’s rights is the lack of “discontent at the woman’s restricted role” in society (p. 110). This was something strongly rejected by other authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who emphasised the need to offer women more professional possibilities (see section 2.3). According to him, Austen was not so engaged in the fight for the improvement of the situation of women in society as Wollstonecraft, for instance. He states that “None of her heroines has any ambition to be admitted into the professions, to manage an estate or to join the army” (Monaghan, 1981, p. 110). Therefore, from this critic’s point of view, Austen defended an improvement in women’s situation in society, but not completely. He suggests that she emphasised women’s intellectual powers or the need for all marriages to be based on mutual respect. However, agreeing with Smith, he maintains that Austen was not an author that demanded “a complete reorganisation of society” because, for her, women were “given a role substantial enough to satisfy the needs of such intelligent and capable people” as her heroines (Monaghan, 1981, p. 121).

According to Kirkham, “Austen’s subject-matter is the central subject-matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism”, that is, women’s rational powers (Kirkham, 1983, p. xi). Kirkham believes that Austen was as much a fierce defender of women’s rights as Mary Wollstonecraft. In line with Smith and Monaghan’s ideas, she sees Austen as a writer that defended women’s intellectual powers and their equality with men’s. Nevertheless, she does not accept that Austen was a writer that defended the improvement of women’s situation, but not reorganisation of society. In this critic’s words (1983), we can see 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*” (p. xi).

As we can see there are different opinions concerning Austen’s involvement in the fight to improve women’s situation and their rights. It is important to highlight that all the authors mentioned acknowledge her defence of women’s rational powers, which was the main tenet of the feminist ideas of her time. This undoubtedly confirms her engagement in the fight for equality between the sexes. Nevertheless, from this point onwards the claims of the selected authors differ. They have different ideas concerning the degree to which Austen promoted a change in women’s position in society. On the one hand, Smith acknowledges that Austen rejected some of the patriarchal ideas of her time but, despite this, he sees her as a writer not concerned with women’s rights or the reorganisation of society. On the other hand, Monaghan presents Austen as a woman that defended an improvement in female’s education and the need of marriages to be based on mutual respect, but not concerned with women’s limitations to make a living. According to him (and in agreement with Smith), she just defended the natural equality between sexes, but not a complete reorganisation of society to promote an improvement in female’s situation. Nevertheless, Kirkham is the one who claims that Austen defended the same ideas as Wollstonecraft and that, therefore, she was promoting the same reorganisation of society that the *Vindication* suggests. This author sees her as a woman actively involved in the struggle for women’s rights. In sum, the disagreement concerning the extent to which Austen was involved in the feminist fight of her time is clear. That being so, some female characters in *Emma* will be analysed, which will help to discover the degree of Austen’s engagement in the fight for women’s rights.

4. Analysis of *Emma*'s main female characters

4.1 *Emma Woodhouse*

Austen criticizes her society but she does not promote an open break with it. By limiting the power of her heroine Austen rescues Emma from the dangers of fantasy, but the writer also renounces exploring the possibilities of an independent woman. Still, Emma retains some power, her intelligence: Mr Woodhouse “could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful” (Justice, 2012, p. 6). However, being intelligent does not mean that Austen’s heroine is rational. Not until the moment in which Emma abandons her fantasy of independence and power, and follows the rules of reason does she become a rational woman. This is a crucial point because by showing that Emma can follow the rules of reason, Austen also shows that she is as morally autonomous as men.

Austen’s heroine has good appearance, good financial position and is intelligent; she thus enjoys the best possible living conditions to live a full life in her world: “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence” (Justice, 2012, p. 5). However, as J. Manuel Barbeito Varela (2004) points out, the use of “seem” in Emma’s presentation suggests that Emma’s real position in society may be not as perfect as it seems after all (p. 158). On the one hand, her qualities and her position gather the most important values of her world, on the other hand, her vanity leads her to think that she is the centre of this world and to confuse reality and fantasy (Barbeito Varela, 2004, pp. 158-159). As the narrator explains,

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 (...) The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her" (Justice, 2012, p. 5).

Emma does not only act as a self-sufficient woman with power to manage her own destiny, but she also believes that she can rule over others. Nevertheless, she will have to start a process of transformation in which she will end up acquiring real knowledge of the world and her real situation.

Austen limits her character's power. In her house, Emma is "the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father" and has "in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period" (Justice, 2012, p. 5). As Smith (1983) notices, she is the one that orders events and manages the household (p. 133). For instance, Emma is able to change a table despite her father is against it, a table that "none but Emma could have had power to place there and persuade her father to use" (Justice, 2012, p. 239). The devotion of Emma's father for her makes him yield to almost all her wishes, encouraging Emma's vanity and her fantasy of power. In fact, there are authors like Marilyn Butler (2012) who claim that Austen's heroine "is the real ruler of the household at Hartfield", but this is not exactly the case (p. 385). Austen does not give Emma the power to make decisions; Emma still needs his father's approval to decide. That is, without his permission, the table would not have been changed; it is her father that has the economic power to make decisions. Mr Woodhouse is the real ruler at Hartfield.

The limitations of Emma's power can also be perceived if we pay attention to her role in society. The privileged treatment that she receives from others because of her social position leads Emma to think that she is the centre of her community and she can

organize its social relations. For instance, Mr Weston (a friend of Emma's family) invites her to arrive the first to the Crown, a place where he was preparing a party, "for the purpose of taking her opinion as to the propriety and comfort of the rooms before any other persons came" (Justice, 2012, p. 219). Emma is thus encouraged to believe that she can govern her community. Nevertheless, the narrator only acknowledges that "Miss Woodhouse was a great personage in Highbury", which does not mean that she is the leader of society (Justice, 2012, p. 19). Organising the party is all on Mr Weston's own – he has the economic power to decide and does not need Emma's approval. He only values Emma's opinion because of her social position – but only on domestic issues, conventionally associated to women – and because he wants to please her. Conversely, it is Mr Knightley's opinion that people value on more important matters. He is the person that everyone in Highbury respect and obey. Other men in the novel, like Mr Elton or Robert Martin, look up to him to decide which woman they should marry (Justice, 2012, p. 43). Even Emma herself, even while believing that she is the centre of her society, respects his authority. As the narrator notices, "she had a sort of habitual respect for his judgement in general" (Justice, 2012, p. 48). Hence, Butler (2012), who seems to disregard Emma's limitations, is wrong when she maintains that Austen's heroine is "the natural feminine leader of her whole community" (p. 385). The person that can be regarded as the leader of Highbury's community is a man, Mr Knightley.

It is worth noticing too that at a certain stage of her development Emma questions one of the most important patriarchal conventions: marriage. Marriage in the eighteenth century was women's means of acquiring financial security and social position, but it also entailed women's oppression and their submission to their husbands' rule. Emma, convinced that she is self-sufficient, argues that she has "none of the usual inducements of women to marry." (Justice, 2012, p. 62). She asserts

Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's (Justice, 2012, p. 62).

As Smith (1983) states, "she wishes to avoid the moral, spiritual and practical losses that marriage would entail" and "she defends the single state as an alternative" (p. 135). If a woman is self-sufficient, as Emma thinks herself to be, marriage might limit her, which she wants to avoid. Even though she is not as self-sufficient as she thinks and she will later give up this position, the idea that marriage might mean renouncing independence is clear.

Deciding to remain single is limited to women with economic independence, a rare case in the Eighteenth century. In line with the patriarchal ideas of Austen's time, Emma does not conceive any alternative to marriage to make a living. For her, marriage is women's only option to reach financial security. This is the reason why, in the case of Harriet Smith – her intimate friend – Emma defends marriage. Since Harriet lacks social position and financial security, Emma wants her to marry Mr Elton (Justice, 2012, p. 26). He will provide her with a home and economic power.

Even in the case of rich women independency is not an ideal. Harriet knows that rejecting marriage would be difficult even in Emma's case. The power of social conventions is made clear. When Emma expresses her wish to avoid marriage, Harriet knows that this would make her a "poor old maid", like one of their neighbours (Miss Bates): "But then, to be an old maid at last, like Miss Bates!" (Justice, 2012, p. 62). Emma, unable to perceive the similitude, rejects this idea and states her self-sufficiency: "Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid" (Justice, 2012, p. 62). But Emma is subject

to conventions like the rest. And the solution that the novel itself proposes is an ideal marriage, rather than an independent woman.

Not only does Emma believe herself able to govern her own life, but she is also convinced that she has the power to govern others. She believes that she has the same power as men and that, therefore, she can dominate others as men do in the patriarchal society of Austen's time. Emma spends almost all the novel guiding others' lives, especially Harriet's. Emma is "patronising and condescending" and acts as a "male mentor" with Harriet (Smith, 1983, p. 135); "She sets out to be 'a manager of destinies'" (Smith, 1983, p. 135). She makes Harriet refuse Robert Martin's marriage proposal even though Harriet is almost determined to accept it (Justice, 2012, pp. 38-41). Nevertheless, she can manage Harriet only because she manipulates her; but manipulation is traditionally a feminine activity, the resource unpowered people use to manage others. In addition, it is easy for Emma to make Harriet refuse the proposal because Harriet plays the role of a submissive girl, unable to decide anything without consulting Emma: "Harriet certainly was not clever, but she had a sweet, docile, grateful disposition; was totally free from conceit; and only desiring to be guided by any one she looked up to" (Justice, 2012, p. 20). Consequently, despite what Emma thinks of herself, Austen does not make her truly powerful. Emma has not a real power to govern others, she just manipulates them.

Emma's fantasy of independence and power will cause her problems. Unable to perceive the limitations of her power, Emma lets vanity govern her to the extent of believing that she is superior to her neighbours and treating them as inferior beings. For instance, when she is at Box Hill she does not hesitate in ridiculing Miss Bates in the presence of all the guests by implying that Miss Bates is always saying dull things (Justice, 2012, pp. 255-256). Smith (1983) believes that Emma ridicules Miss Bates to

secure her position of power and make clear that the rest of the people are inferior to her (p. 134). Nevertheless, it seems more appropriate to argue that Emma, at this point, completely loses touch with reality. She believes that she is so superior to the rest of the people that she has the right to ridicule them.

Austen does not approve this fantasy and uses Mr Knightley – an intimate friend of Emma’s family – to scold and rescue her heroine. Mr Knightley acts as Emma’s mentor, the person that guides her to confront reality. After the incident at Box Hill, he asks her “How could you be *so* unfeeling to Miss Bates?” (Justice, 2012, p. 258). Emma, blinded by vanity, says: “It was not so very bad.” (Justice, 2012, p. 258). Nevertheless, Mr Knightley, trying to make her understand, claims that

It was badly done indeed! – You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her – and before her niece, too – and before others (Justice, 2012, p. 259).

It is at this moment that Emma acknowledges that “The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!” (Justice, 2012, p. 259). Emma finally becomes aware of how wrong she was in treating Miss Bates so badly. She takes moral responsibility for her actions and reaches moral enlightenment (Butler, 2012, p. 385).

From this incident onwards, the heroine starts her transformation. From now on, Emma progressively abandons her fantasy and vanity, starts to follow the rules of reason, and ends up acting as a morally independent woman. By properly using her intellectual powers, she develops her moral judgement and acquires moral seriousness. In a society

that regarded women as inferior beings, Emma gains the respect of others, which makes her truly powerful in this regard.

This can be seen in the change of Mr Knightley's treatment of Emma. Although he begins acting like a mentor to her, after acknowledging how Emma has evolved, he sees her as a truly respectable person: "I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it" (Justice, 2012, p. 296). In line with what Smith (1983) points out, "She has gained recognition in his eyes as a sensible, independent person, no longer a child or a 'feminine' woman" (p. 153). Mr Knightley no longer sees the necessity to take care of her. Emma has gained moral seriousness and, therefore, autonomy; she no longer needs his guidance. Hence, with her heroine Austen rejects the patriarchal idea that women are not rational or morally autonomous beings. Besides, through Emma's development she shows that women can and must learn from experience, reaching the standards that make them as worthy of the respect as men.

Special attention must be paid to Emma's marriage. The heroine, who thought herself able avoid marriage, ends up yielding to conventions. As Austen does not promote women's self-sufficiency, her heroine has no option but to marry. When Emma abandons her fantasy of independence and starts to follow the rules of reason, she marries Mr Knightley. Emma's marriage has been a matter of considerable debate. On the one hand, Claudia L. Johnson (2012) believes that Emma's final marriage proves that she does not end asserting her independence (p. 424). On the other, Carlos J. Gómez Blanco (1991) is not sure to what extent Emma's marriage is so conventional and enslaves her (p. 241). This debate is caused by the fact that, although Emma yields to social conventions and marries, her marriage is not completely conventional. Mr Knightley accepts to move to Emma's house with her father instead of taking Emma to his house (Donwell). He knows

that Emma would not want to leave her father alone and, thus, the only solution he sees is to move with them. Emma, aware of the importance of his decision, is “sensible of all the affection it evinced (...) in quitting Donwell, he must be sacrificing a great deal of independence of hours and habits” (Justice, 2012, p. 309).

There are authors who argue that Knightley is actually ceding power because he agrees to share Emma’s home and be in her domain (Johnson, 2012, p. 427). However, it is not a question of ceding power. Austen is actually emphasising the need of mutual respect in marriage. As Smith (1983) highlights, “The marriage of Emma and Knightley is based on the spirit of equality and mutual respect” (p. 155). By moving to Hartfield, Mr Knightley proves that he regards Emma as an equal, not as an inferior, and that he respects her and her living conditions. Knightley is sure that they have “every right that equal worth can give, to be happy together” (Justice, 2012, p. 320). Instead of being based on patriarchal terms of dominance and submission, Emma’s marriage “holds the fullest promise of life, one in which the female is openly admired and shares decisions and in which there is mutual trust and a healthy sense of companionship” (Smith, 1983, pp. 154-155). Nevertheless, in line with what Johnson previously pointed out, Emma’s marriage does not celebrate complete equality. Although Mr Knightley and Emma share decisions as Smith notices, Emma never acquires independence. Mr Knightley is the only one able to make economic decisions; Emma never becomes a self-sufficient woman. Being a realistic writer, Austen knows that women’s independence would be impossible in her society and, therefore, she only promotes an ideal marriage based on mutual respect.

4.2 Mrs Elton

As Emma, Mrs Elton is another female character ruled by a fantasy of independence. However, although Austen rescued Emma from it, Mrs Elton never abandons her false

world. Austen uses her to criticize those women that never evolve and never follow the guide of reason.

Mrs Elton, as Emma, is described as an apparently empowered woman. “In addition to all the usual advantages of perfect beauty and merit”, this woman is “in possession of an independent fortune, of so many thousands as would always be called ten” (Justice, 2012, p. 126). Nevertheless, even though it may appear that Mrs Elton is self-sufficient, she loses her economic power when she marries Mr Elton. This can be seen when Mrs Elton wants to help a friend, Jane Fairfax, by sparing her the necessity to go to the post office. Mrs Elton wants to employ the man who collects the Eltons’ letters from the post office in collecting Jane’s too, but she needs the approval of her husband to do so (Justice, 2012, p. 204). Mr Elton is the only one that can decide whether the man can collect Jane’s letters or not because he is the only one with economic independence.

Unaware of her own limitations, Mrs Elton acts as if she had the power to govern her husband. As Barbeito Varela (2004) points out, Mrs Elton creates her own false world as Emma does (p. 158). At Box Hill, she decides not to join the game and acts as her husband’s ruler when she decides for him and says: “Pass Mr. E.” (Justice, 2012, p. 257). This leads authors like Gómez Blanco (1991) to claim that Mrs Elton dominates her husband (p. 244). Nevertheless, as Smith (1983) quite rightly notices, Mrs Elton does not actually have such amount of power (p. 136). For this critic, Mrs Elton, as Emma, must manipulate to govern others (Smith, 1983, p. 136). When Mrs Elton is talking about the collection of Jane’s letters, she declares “The thing is determined (...) I do flatter myself, my dear Jane, that my influence is not entirely worn out” (Justice, 2012, p. 204). Her statement not only confirms that it is her husband who has the power to decide, but also proves that the reason why it seems that she governs him is because she manipulates and influences him in order to fulfil her wishes.

The reason why she is blind to her limitations and her real position in society is because of her extreme vanity and superficiality. As Emma explains, Mrs Elton is a “vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance” (Justice, 2012, p. 187). Although this description is similar to Emma’s and ironically shows Emma’s capacity at this stage to see the straw in her neighbour’s eye rather than the beam in her own, the narrator treated Emma with more sympathy, as Barbeito Varela notices (2004, p. 161). Emma has the possibility of reaching moral enlightenment and perceiving reality. Mrs Elton’s own words confirm its impossibility in her case: “Blessed with so many resources within myself, the world was not necessary to *me*” (Justice, 2012, p. 190). She is just a plain superficial woman that is never able to perceive the truth of her real situation and limitations.

Mrs Elton clearly represents what Emma could become if she did not correct her behaviour (Smith, 1983, p. 136). Emma was governed by vanity too, unable to see the reality of her situation, but she ended up proving that she was a rational woman able to abandon vanity and follow the rule of reason. She was able to reach moral enlightenment, to learn from experience and perceive reality. Hence, Emma became not only respected as member of a wealthy family, but she also achieved moral respectability in the ideal community of the novel. Mrs Elton, on the contrary, never follows the rule of reason and never perceives the reality of her situation, which is why some of the characters of the novel criticise her. For instance, Emma thinks that Mrs Elton is a woman with “so little judgement that she thought herself coming with superior knowledge of the world” (Justice, 2012, p. 193). Even Mr Knightley states that “An unpretending, single-minded, artless girl” would be “infinitely to be preferred by any man of sense and taste to such woman as Mrs. Elton” (Justice, 2012, p. 228).

Following the ideas of the Enlightenment, in Austen's time some thinkers already argued that women were able to use reason, to question reality, to learn from experience, and, hence, of reaching moral autonomy. Austen, as a woman influenced by these ideas, does not like Mrs Elton's attitude and lack of questioning. The rejection of the community of the novel of the moral values Mrs Elton represents shows Austen's critique of superficial women that do not use their reasoning powers. For this reason, Mrs Elton never gains the respect of others as Emma did.

Special attention must be paid to Mrs Elton's aim to defend women against patriarchal oppression. This character does indeed transmit some ideas that defend an improvement in women's situation in society. Being aware of the contemporary defence of the rights of women, Austen introduces through Mrs Elton some feminist ideas of the period. According to Patricia Beer's explanation (1977), Mrs Elton is a character that expresses "something like feminist sentiments" (p. 45). This critic pays attention to the fact that Mrs Elton laments that women have to leave their homes after marriage (Beer, 1977, p. 45). Mrs Elton, talking to Emma, states: "Whenever you are transplanted, like me (...) you will understand how very delightful is to meet with any thing [*sic*] like what was left behind. I always say this is quite one of the evils of matrimony" (Justice, 2012, p. 188). Besides, Mrs Elton also questions why wives need their husbands to make decisions, even domestic ones (Beer, 1977, p. 45). Talking to Mrs Weston, Mrs Elton claims: "as far as I can presume to determine anything without the concurrence of my lord and master. You know, Mrs. Weston, you and I must be cautious how we express ourselves" (Justice, 2012, p. 204). Mrs Elton herself declares: "I always take the part of my own sex (...) I always stand up for women" (Justice, 2012, p. 211).

However, agreeing with Beer (1977), these remarks are only part of Mrs Elton's enthusiasm (p. 45). The character does not act accordingly. For instance, when she

defends that wives should not be obliged to leave their homes when they marry, she seems proud of being at Hartfield. She declares that the beauty of the place is such that her family would be delighted to be there (Justice, 2012, p. 188). Furthermore, even though she regrets that husbands make the decisions, she is quite “triumphant at having acquired a husband herself” (Beer, 1977, p. 45). She is all the time mentioning Mr Elton and, proud of being married, usually calls him “lord and master” (Justice, 2012, p. 313). In sum, Mrs Elton does not act according to the feminist ideas she sometimes seems to defend.

On the basis of *Emma*, one cannot be sure about what Austen really thought about the feminist ideas expressed by Mrs Elton; the only thing that can be stated concerning this issue is that Austen knew these ideas, that she was aware of them. Mrs Elton proudly endorses the patriarchal ideas of her time, which suggests that Austen was against the ideas that were defended in her time concerning the struggle for women’s rights and the improvement of women’s situation, but this cannot be known for sure. What happens is that, Austen – a realistic writer – does not naïvely believe in ideals of independence. As Mrs Elton is not self-sufficient, her ideas would not be possible in the society of the eighteenth century and, consequently, Austen makes her embrace the social institutions of the time.

4.3 Mrs Churchill

Mrs Churchill is a secondary character who never appears directly in *Emma* and little information is given about her. This is the reason why most of the authors and critics overlook her when analysing Austen’s novel. Nevertheless, the unusual amount of power she enjoys makes her role in the society of the novel worth analysing. This woman “rules at Enscombe”, the house in which she lives with her husband and nephew, Frank

Churchill (Justice, 2012, p. 87). Besides, she “governed her husband entirely” (Justice, 2012, p. 13). This is the reason why Smith (1983) maintains that she is “the complete usurper of masculine rule” (p. 136). However, Emma notices that “she makes no sacrifice for the comfort of the husband, to whom she owes every thing [*sic*]” (Justice, 2012, p. 88) and Mr Weston, talking about the Churchills, explains that “She was nobody when he married her, barely the daughter of a gentleman” (Justice, 2012, p. 214). Consequently, even though Mrs Churchill is powerful now, her high social position and economic power come from her husband. Mrs Churchill does not assume completely masculine rule, as Smith believes; it is her husband who has the economic power and who is the real ruler. What happens is that he is “an easy, guidable man” and allows Mrs Churchill to manage his money and govern as she pleases, which is certainly a subversive idea in Austen’s time (Justice, 2012, p. 268). As Mr Weston explains, “Mrs. Churchill does every thing [*sic*] that any other fine lady ever did” (Justice, 2012, p. 212).

Enjoying such degree of freedom, attention must be paid to how Mrs Churchill rules over others. Having a guidable husband, she is allowed to decide anything and condition the life of her nephew, Frank Churchill. Frank is a young man and, according to the eighteenth century patriarchal ideas, he should be free to act following his own will. Nevertheless, he is completely oppressed by Mrs Churchill. She has the power to prevent him from leaving Enscombe or visiting his father, Mr Weston. As Mrs Weston acknowledges, Mrs Churchill’s dominance is so strong that Frank’s visit “depends entirely upon his aunt’s spirits and pleasure” and “upon her being willing to spare him” (Justice, 2012, p. 87). When Frank manages to visit Highbury, it is Mrs Churchill who decides how long he is going to spend there (Justice, 2012, p. 177). This is so because, as Johnson (2012) explains, Mrs Churchill’s rule over her family is such that her “whims as well as her aches and pains are felt, discussed, and respected miles away from her sofa”

(p. 419). Mrs Churchill even prevents him from marrying the woman he loves. Frank loves Jane Fairfax but he knows that his aunt would not accept this marriage because Jane has no social position. Hence, he engages her in secret. Only after Mrs Churchill's death does Frank dare to disclose the secret to his father and the rest (Justice, 2012, p. 272). As Mrs Weston notices, "While poor Mrs. Churchill lived (...) there could not have been a hope, a chance, a possibility" (Justice, 2012, p. 275).

Being so restrictive, Mrs Churchill becomes a disagreeable character for the community of the novel. Smith (1983) believes that "Mrs Churchill is branded as heartless, unreasonable and tyrannical" because of how she oppresses her husband (p. 136). However, as previously explained, her rule over her husband is limited. The real reason why she is badly regarded by Highbury's community is because of her rigidity in her treatment of her nephew's relation with Jane Fairfax. Agreeing with Barbeito Varela (2004), Mrs Churchill is a woman only guided by economic interest and social position (p. 171). The community of the novel knows that economy rules over society. For instance, Emma herself laments that, even though Jane is an intelligent and a well-prepared woman, her abilities will go unperceived and not valued because of her low social position and lack economic power (Justice, 2012, p. 116). Nonetheless, whereas Mrs Churchill disregards Jane's intellect and abilities and only pays attention to her low social and financial position, some members of the community of the novel perceive that social position is not all that should be valued in a woman. Emma, for instance, values Jane for being "one of the most lovely and accomplished young women" (Justice, 2012, p. 276) and Mr Knightley himself acknowledges that Frank "could not have found her superior" (Justice, 2012, p. 295). The ability of the rest of the community to see Jane's advantages and qualities makes them reject Mrs Churchill's rule. By presenting Mrs Churchill's rule as disagreeable, Austen criticises the rigidity of this character and

defends the need of valuing intelligence and culture in women – their rational capacities – over their social position.

4.4 Austen's ideas about women

After the analysis of these female characters, we can say that Austen does not promote a radical social change in *Emma*. In line with the conventional ideas of the time, while men rule society, women in *Emma* are always dependent beings relegated to the domestic sphere. The study of Emma, Mrs Elton and Mrs Churchill prove that, even though Austen gives these characters a certain amount of power, she does not question the patriarchal order and she does not make them economically independent. On the contrary, her characters are economically dependent and therefore they always need a man to make their decisions. Even Mrs Churchill, who seems to enjoy a higher degree of freedom, is able to make her own choices only because her husband lets her. She is not the one that has the economic power to decide. Austen does not promote women's right to achieve economic independence and hence their possibility to avoid marriage – and the subordination it entailed – as women's only means to reach financial security. Instead, in line with the patriarchal ideas of the time, the only way that the women in the novel have to make a living is marriage, which makes them dependent on men. Thus, Smith (1983) and Monaghan (1981) correctly claim that Austen shows little interest in the feminist defence of women's access to professions, the only way to their self-assertion and independence from men (see section 3.3). Against Kirkham's idea (see section 3.3), the analysis of *Emma* proves that Austen is not as fierce a defender of women's rights as Wollstonecraft was and that she does not defend complete equality between the sexes as Wollstonecraft did. The author of *Emma's* works within the limits of the patriarchal

society in which she lives and does not question its basic tenets – men’s rule over women and the restriction of women to the domestic sphere as well as to their roles of mothers and wives.

However, it is important to highlight that Austen defends the basis of the “early feminist movement” or the “Enlightenment feminism”: the idea that women are as rational and morally autonomous as men. Reason is our essence, what makes us humans, and Austen rejects the patriarchal idea that women are not rational creatures (Monaghan, 1981; Smith, 1983) (see section 3.3). This links *Emma*’s author with Burney and Edgeworth, two of the women writers read by Austen who also vindicated women’s intellectual powers. In *Emma*, both men and women are rational beings and, as the study of Mrs Churchill shows, intelligence and culture in women are something valued in the community of the novel – even above economic power.

Austen affirms that women and men are equal as to their rational powers and promotes the development of their intellectual capacities. She even challenges the patriarchal idea that women’s virtue was related to meekness or kindness and defends that it is the moral standards that they can reach that make women worthy of respect. In *Emma*, the means to obtain virtue is for both sexes the same: intellectual development, which is an idea already defended by Wollstonecraft (see section 2.3). This can be seen in Emma and Mrs Elton. On the one hand, Emma abandons vanity by developing her reasoning powers, which enables her to acquire moral seriousness and intellectual independence and makes others – especially Mr Knightley – to see her as an equal. On the other hand, Mrs Elton never develops her rational powers and cannot therefore abandon superficiality and reach moral seriousness. For this reason, she does not deserve the true respect of the rest of the characters.

Nevertheless, even though Austen praises women's intellectual and moral development, her female characters do not use reason to question reality. Both Emma and Mrs Elton question society and its conventions when they see the world through their fantasy of independence and power. Emma is able to perceive marriage's oppression and how it limits women; and Mrs Elton questions the fact that husbands are the ones that make all the decisions and criticizes women's obligation to leave their home for their husbands' houses. Mrs Elton never abandons superficiality, but when Emma abandons fantasy and starts to use her reasoning powers, she stops questioning reality. Instead, she ends up accepting her society's conventions and becomes a married woman. As a realistic writer, Austen does not question the basis of social organisation; rather, she criticizes it by measuring it against the ideals of her time. She knows that the feminist ideas that emerge in the fantasy of Emma or Mrs Elton would not be possible in the society of the eighteenth century and, therefore, she makes her characters embrace the institutions of their society.

One should not forget, though, that, even though Emma submits to social rules, her marriage is not conventional. As Monaghan (1981) points out, Austen supports marriages based on mutual respect, not on relations of submission and dominance (see section 3.3). Consequently, although not questioning society's organisation or promoting women's independence, Austen introduces changes within the possibilities her society offers.

In sum, taking into account *Emma's* analysis, Austen cannot be seen as a supporter of complete equality between the sexes, like Wollstonecraft. As explained in chapter 2, in Austen's time some women writers started to fight for women's rights, for the improvement of their position in society. Even though Austen was aware of what was going on, a close reading *Emma's* shows that she did not go far in this feminist fight. Knowing how the patriarchal society of her time worked, Austen only advocates feminist

ideas in her characters' fantasies and introduces slight changes such as the need of marriages to be based on mutual respect; but this does not make her a feminist writer who questions society and promotes women's independence. Therefore, after focusing on *Emma's* female characters, it can be asserted that Austen only defends the natural equality between men and women.

5. Conclusion

The thesis of this TFG was that Austen's representation of women proves this writer's defence of women's dignity. The aim of this project was to show the extent to which the feminist ideas of the eighteenth century influenced Jane Austen and her representation of women in one of her novels, *Emma*.

In order to properly evaluate Austen's defence of women one must situate it in the context of her time. The eighteenth century was a period dominated by a patriarchal ideology. Women were considered inferior to men – both physically and intellectually – and men were the ones with authority in society. Being regarded as inferior and irrational beings, women were relegated to the domestic sphere and their only two roles were those of mothers and wives. It was therefore essential to affirm their rational powers.

In this period started the fight for women's rights and this is an aspect of the historical context that we must consider when evaluating Austen's position. The feminism of this century defended the natural equality between the sexes and the improvement of women's position in society. Austen agreed with this. But one of the founding figures of feminism, Wollstonecraft, not only fostered the natural equality between the sexes, but also fought for a reorganisation of society in her *Vindication*. Austen could not go so far.

Moreover, the novel offered women the means to enter the literary world and do something outside their limited role in society. Consequently, it did not only increase women's conscience about their oppression and led them to question their situation; it also facilitated the transmission of the feminist ideas of the time.

This is the context in which Jane Austen was born. She received the conventional patriarchal education of that period. However, she was an avid reader who enjoyed reading works of some women writers that criticised the situation of women and defended an improvement of it. This influenced Austen and her representation of women in her novels. Nevertheless, there is not an agreement concerning the degree of her involvement in the fight for women's rights.

In order to clarify the degree of Austen's engagement in the defence of women's rights, I performed a close reading of *Emma*. This novel includes some female characters – Emma, Mrs Elton and Mrs Churchill – that have or seem to have an unusual amount of power and authority. This makes the analysis of this novel concerning Austen's ideas about women interesting. The study of these characters proved that the power they seem to enjoy is not so great as they think because Austen never gives them independence and always subordinates them to men. Besides, Austen does not question the domestic role of women and still represents them as mothers or wives without conceiving any other alternative for them. What she challenges in *Emma* is the patriarchal idea that women are not rational beings. Without presenting women as self-sufficient beings, Austen vindicates their dignity by presenting them as rational beings able to reach moral seriousness. She even introduces a critique of those women who do not reach the moral standards that would make them worthy of respect.

Therefore, although aware of the fight for women's rights of her time, Austen did not become involved in it. The defence of the natural equality between sexes was the

ground of the feminist fight for the rights of women but the writer did not go so far. Wollstonecraft, for instance, did. The close reading *Emma* makes it possible to claim that Austen did not promote the economic independence of women that would entail a radical improvement of women's position in society; she just defended women's rational capacities. The study of *Emma* thus shows the degree of the influence of the eighteenth century feminist ideas on Austen and her representation of women, which was the aim of this TFG.

Of course, there is much more that needs to be discussed regarding Jane Austen and her relation with the position of women in society. It might be an interesting prospect for the future to study the rest of her novels. This would show whether Austen only defended women's rational capacities or if she included some other ideas concerning the improvement on women's position in society in the rest of her novels. For the moment I hope to have shown that, within the patriarchal society of the eighteenth century, Austen's defence of women's dignity in *Emma* consisted of affirming their rational capacities and moral autonomy.

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