Feminine Passion as Feminine Power: Challenging Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Rational Woman' in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*

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Abstract

Describing the feminist ideology central to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Anne Mellor identifies an 'unreconciled tension between female sexual passion and female self-control' (Mellor, 1993: 44) evident in Wollstonecraft's attempt to define a woman's rightful place in the late eighteenth century. This article investigates this tension alongside other paradoxes in Wollstonecraft's argument and their impact on the presentation of feminine passion in Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) and Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), and uses *Vindication* as a framework to analyse the presentation of femininity, emotion and power in these works. The article explores the connotations of novel reading and feminine sensibility as presented in *Northanger Abbey*'s Catherine Morland and argues for the autonomy and power that can be gained from this, alongside analysing the similar representations of feminine-coded power in Smith's poetic representations of the connection between humans and nature. Finally, the article concludes that both Austen and Smith reconcile the tension identified by Mellor through their proposal that feminine power (for Wollstonecraft only attainable through rationality and 'self-control') and feminine passion not only can co-exist, but are, in fact, complementary.

Keywords: Feminine Romanticism, women and the novel, tactile poetics, Jane Austen and feminine power, Charlotte Smith and feminine emotion, Mary Wollstonecraft and feminine desire

Anne Mellor's chapter 'The Rational Woman' in *Romanticism & Gender* argues that the primary intention of women writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was to write characters that aligned with feminist philosopher and writer Mary Wollstonecraft's 'revolutionary idea that women must think as well as feel, that they must act with prudence, avoid the pitfalls of sexual desire, and learn from their mistakes' (Mellor, 1993: 40). However, describing the feminist ideology central to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792),[1] Mellor also identifies an 'unreconciled tension between female sexual passion and female self-control' (1993: 44) evident in Wollstonecraft's attempt to define a woman's rightful place in the late eighteenth century. In this article, I define passion as proposed by Wollstonecraft and trace its presence both within a Romantic '**culture of Sensibility**' (Nagle, 2007) and within Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784). By using *Vindication* as a framework to analyse the presentation of femininity, emotion and power in *Northanger Abbey* and Smith's 'Sonnet IV: To the Moon'[2] and 'Sonnet XLIV: Written in the Church Yard at Middleton in Sussex',[3] I will argue for the power and autonomy that can be gained from feminine passion. I will also challenge both Wollstonecraft and Mellor by exploring how writers such as Austen and Smith begin to reconcile the tension identified by Mellor through their proposal that feminine power (for Wollstonecraft only attainable through rationality and 'self-control') and feminine passion not only can co-exist but are, in fact, complementary.

Mary Wollstonecraft's stance on feminine nature and passion as existing 'to the detriment of reason' (Berges, 2013: 49) was not totally anti-emotion, but rather against 'a certain kind of emotions, which she often refers to as sensibility, and which are encouraged to grow, especially in young women, at the expense of reason' (i2013.: 43). I define this feminine passion as an

attraction towards feelings centred in the body, and towards these certain emotions and sensibilities that Berges refers to (such as love, lust, desire, fear and anxiety) that are centred in the body and/or incite a physical response. In Wollstonecraft's own words, 'to endeavour to reason love out of the world, would be to out Quixote Cervantes, and equally offend against common sense' ([1792] 1999: 93). She argued instead for a restraint against, rather than a total removal of, 'this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it should not be allowed to dethrone superior powers' ([1792] 1999). Wollstonecraft's placement of feminine rationality as above feminine passion in importance stands in arguably hypocritical contrast with her other works, which, according to Janet M. Todd, 'overtly question the possibility of pure rationalism and display the seduction of the sensibility she so ringingly opposed in her polemics' (1999: xxx). This illustrates that, despite the idealist progressiveness of her argument for women's capacity for rationality, even Wollstonecraft herself could not align her theories with the realities of human desire. This is especially true of her own life, which involved turbulent romances, affairs, and a child born out of wedlock (Todd, 1999: xxv). The tension between Wollstonecraft's arguments in *Vindication* and the realities of her own life and writings helps us to consider how works by Austen and Smith have argued against Wollstonecraft's belief in reason over passion. Additionally, I consider how the idea of women being more drawn to passionate emotion, and therefore unable to fulfil Wollstonecraft's idea of their full potential, may act as a source of power for them by allowing them to assert their identity as women, rather than needing to adopt 'masculine' traits and virtues to achieve equality.

Referring to the culture of Sensibility within literature of the Romantic era, Christopher C. Nagle claims that 'Romanticism is built on the ground of Sensibility' (2007: 3), which he describes as 'a dominant cultural belief in feeling as the glue that holds society together' (2007: 5). This emphasis on feeling, emotion and sensibility has arguably grown to become the dominant recognisable trait of Romantic literature. However, these literary representations of feeling and emotion have also historically been considered

differently in the works of male and female writers. While canonical male writers such as Wordsworth held respected places within the culture of Sensibility thanks to their emotional writings, when women writers attempted to address emotion in the same way, the interests and desires of their speakers and characters (and, by association, their female readers) were seen as frivolous or irrational. This idea is well exemplified through the trope of the novel-reading woman, whose voracious and excessive taste for 'emotional' literature (such as **gothic novels** or **novels of sensibility**) was viewed as unproductive and overindulgent (Wyett, 2015). This idea of a less valuable kind of feminine Romanticism circles back to a wider dominant belief of the time in the fundamental differences between the nature of men and women, which Wollstonecraft argues against through her claim that women hold the same capacity for rational thought as men ([1792] 1999: 119). However, I propose that these supposedly fundamental differences do hold some truth, especially when considering Berges' criticism of Wollstonecraft in reference to some contemporary feminist standpoints on *Vindications,* which argue against Wollstonecraft's 'mostly male way of understanding motivations' (Berges, 2013: 45). When considering these writers from this standpoint of contemporary feminism, I propose that both Austen and Smith wrote far ahead of their time by presenting this greater feminine propensity towards passion not as a detriment, but as a beneficial source of power. This power allowed them to achieve independence and assert their place within the culture of Sensibility and thus, according to Nagle, Romantic literature as a whole.[4]

The image of the voracious female novel reader is a key example of how feminine emotional overindulgence has been presented and criticised in literature, given that novels were viewed by many in the Romantic era as unserious forms of literature that could only appeal to the weaker female mind. In fact, it has been argued of characters such as Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's *Northanger* Abbey, that their over-active imagination and love of novels are what has led them astray from rational thought. Austen challenges this idea through her presentation of Catherine as one of the novel's most

perceptive characters. Catherine's naïve traits, which arguably make her 'Austen's least appealing heroine' (Lau, 2018: 465), are presented as a part of her personality rather than as traits brought on by her love of novels. In fact, it is only when Catherine is introduced to the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe by Isabella Thorpe and begins to read them voraciously that she develops a unique perceptiveness of the social politics occurring around her. Those sensational novels teach Catherine to be suspicious of the villainous characters in her life, such as General Tilney. While she may be incorrect about the severity of General Tilney's crimes (initially supposing him to have murdered his wife in a gothic scene akin to Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)), she is correct to suspect his intentions, eventually learning that he will only bless her marriage with his son Henry on the basis of her financial prospects. Upon Catherine's return home to her family, her mother notes 'you always were a sad little scatterbrained creature; but now you must have been forced to have your wits about you' (Austen, [1818] 2019: 313), noting the development of Catherine's character during her time spent discovering gothic novels. It can be argued that Catherine's renouncement of novels upon her realisation of how mistaken she was about the severity of the General's crimes, and her apology for 'the liberty which her imagination had dared to take' ([1818] 2019: 263) is Austen's way of aligning herself with Wollstonecraft's ideas on rationality. However, it should be noted that Austen used *Northanger Abbey* to put forth her own clear endorsement of novel reading as a serious and worthy pastime, and novels as 'work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed' ([1818] 2019: 39). Catherine may choose to condemn and renounce novel reading, but it is her so-called 'indulgence' in those novels that opens her eyes to the truth of the suspicious parties around her. Catherine's love for gothic and sentimental novels, whose plots highlight passionate emotions such as fear, lust and desire, is inexplicably linked with the desires of her own life. Despite her own eventual renouncement of those novels as frivolous, or even dangerous, they play a fundamental role in allowing Catherine to find a source of power, agency and independence within her own passion and desires.

Austen's choice to model *Northanger Abbey* as a parody of the passionate gothic novel, and her use of what Miriam R. Fuller (2010) terms the 'domestic gothic' in the translation of classic gothic scenarios to Catherine's domestic life, additionally demonstrate the usefulness of Catherine's passion for novels (and their romantic, lustful or fearful plots) in exerting her agency. Fuller argues that Catherine's immersion into the emotional plots of her novels, which contributes to her ignorance of the truth of her real-life situation, often acts as her salvation. Because she often does not recognise the true extent of the danger she is in, she is able to act rationally and respond maturely to that danger. In the words of Fuller, 'it is Catherine's subconscious refusal to be helpless and passive that makes her powerful' (2010: 103). Her passion for the gothic – and for Henry Tilney, evident when she claims that 'her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney' (Austen, [1818] 2019: 183) – is also what draws Catherine to the setting of Northanger Abbey itself. While she spends most of her time there seeking to expose the abbey's grand gothic secrets, it is there that Catherine is forced to face the most maturing in her character. Although Catherine eventually faces a 'revolution in her ideas' ([1818] 2019: 281) by deciding that she would prefer to live in a parsonage like Henry's Woodston over a grand gothic abbey, it is due to her experience at the abbey that she is able to discover the truth about General Tilney and also secure her romantic match with Henry, which she does independently. The intersections between passion and rationality are highlighted again here by Austen as Catherine's rational awakening is presented alongside her emotional one (through her romantic union with Henry Tilney, whom she has desired since the novel's beginning).

Turning now to Charlotte Smith's 1784 collection of poems *Elegiac Sonnets*, Angela Keane highlights the fact that 'it is hard to identify many of Smith's speakers by age or gender' (2013: 11). This ambiguity in age and gender is a tool through which Smith introduces themes of both feminine power and feminine transgression in her sonnets. The characters and forces that Smith *does* identify by gender are often powerful forces of nature that she characterises as feminine. This is exemplified in 'To the Moon', when she

describes the moon as 'Queen of the silver bow!' (Smith, [1784] 2016: 18). Smith characterises the moon as a 'benignant sphere' ([1784] 2016), a kind of mother where 'the sad children of despair and woe / Forget in thee, their cup of sorrow here' ([1784] 2016). The presentation of the moon as a calming and soothing motherly feminine presence comforts the speaker and contributes to the poem's tone of peace and serenity. According to Keane, there is indeed both a biological and biographical context for Smith's poetry, 'as though her poems were peculiarly linked to her female body' (Keane, 2013: 7). If this is true, we can therefore place Smith herself in the position of the speaker, and the poem can be interpreted as Smith's own proposal for the power of femininity to settle troubled emotion.

The feminisation of powerful forces of nature is also evident in 'Churchyard', again in the power of the feminine moon, the 'mute arbitress of the tides' (Smith, [1784] 2016: 43), which controls the wave of destruction that befalls the churchyard. The poem contains a strong sense of wild feminine passion throughout. The churchyard setting also introduces gothic elements that, much like Austen's work, evidence Smith's willing indulgence in fearful ideas of mystery and the supernatural that were traditionally perceived as irrational. In 'Churchyard', Smith creates a powerful semantic field of destruction, employing visceral descriptive language as opposed to calm and picturesque metaphors. She describes a sea and waves with 'swelling surges' ([1784] 2016), and proposes feminine force as the power behind this passionate and powerful destruction. These language choices in 'Churchyard' also speak to the idea of Smith's '**tactile poetics**' (Girten, 2018: 215) and the emphasis placed on touch within her sonnets. In 'Churchyard', Smith focuses on how the physical elements of nature interact and touch one another. The 'warring elements' (Smith, [1784] 2016: 43) are bent on smashing through everything in their path, and Smith's language is centred around physical movements of the body and the body of nature, as opposed to centring in metaphors only visible within the mind. Kirsten M. Girten has highlighted the way in which this emphasis on touch exemplifies Smith's choice to move away from a male-centred poetic tradition of sight and mind being emphasised over touch.

Through this, Smith challenges the idea that sensory experiences centred in the masculine mind are of higher value than ones centred in the feminine body. This gendered divide between mind and body is also evident in Romantic cultural understandings of rationality and passion as being centred in the intelligent masculine mind or the sexual feminine body. This echoes other gendered double standards in perceptions of, for example, melancholy and hysteria, and again the belief in fundamental differences between the nature of men and women. Smith's choice to focus on senses centred in tactile 'feminine' bodily experience highlights, much like Austen, the power and agency that can be found in experiences centred in feminine passion.

Similarly to Catherine Morland's desire to transgress gender propriety by refusing to sit docile and accepting of her circumstances, Smith's sonnets also contain a strong sense of feminine social transgression through the physical movements and wanderings of her speakers. This idea of seeking adventure and 'wild wanderings' (Bredar, 2019: 157) and the emotional reflection these wanderings can elicit are important characteristics of Romantic literature and the Romantic ideology as a whole. Smith's desire to partake in these wanderings is evident in the way 'her sonnets generate transgressive potential and begin to make a place for the female traveller in a male-dominated tradition of **Romantic pedestrianism**' (2019: 162). This desire to transgress is evident in 'To the Moon', where the speaker expresses that 'Alone and pensive, I delight to stray' (Smith, [1784] 2016: 18), taking passionate pleasure in the transgressive nature of her wandering. If the autobiographical nature of the sonnets can continue to be assumed, then it is Smith herself we see delighting in this moonlit walk, and the 'soft calm' that it sheds upon her 'troubled breast' ([1784] 2016). If Smith seeks a way to soothe her troubles, she finds it in the breaking of gendered boundaries and the freedom that she finds in a position usually reserved for men. However, this walk and this freedom are only temporary, and the melancholic mood of the poem can be read as Smith's own jealousy of the free and limitlessly powerful feminine moon.

While Mary Wollstonecraft's proposals on female nature and rationality were a revolutionary feminist development for their time, there existed a

fundamental conflict in her ideas. For Wollstonecraft's claims to function as she proposed, they necessitated women to renounce any natural emotional urges towards not just sex, but also adventure, romance and love, in favour of marriage and lives of propriety – and likely misery. This unrealistic ideal of feminine rationality that involved the suppression of urges such as love and lust (that are altogether fundamentally human) was an ideal that even Wollstonecraft herself could not live up to in her own life (Todd, 1999: xxv). In their respective challenging of the traditional gendering of interests and activities within the Romantic era, Austen and Smith have both proven that their female heroines (or, in the case of Smith, the natural forces she genders as female) may have what Wollstonecraft described as a predisposition towards passionate emotion. However, this predisposition can lead to a more developed and nuanced level of social perceptiveness (as argued by Austen), and can also inspire revolutionary social transgression by women into fields of literature previously dominated by male Romanticism (as argued by Smith). Both authors highlight that this instinct towards passionate emotion is not a disadvantage for women, but in fact a source of power to assert their independence in a society that wishes to place them in a strict social position. Where Wollstonecraft believed in fundamental emotional differences between men and women that required women to become more like men to find their equality, the work of Austen and Smith instead asserts and embodies the universality of human emotion that was the driving force behind some of the greatest works of Romantic literature.

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Glossary

Culture of Sensibility: A cultural belief during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which inspired and accompanied the rise of Romanticism, and emphasised emotion and feeling as the primary driving forces of society. See Nagle 2007.

Gothic novels: A genre blending elements of supernatural, mystery, horror and romance fiction, and themes of secrets and hidden pasts with dark and brooding aesthetics.

Novels of Sensibility: A genre with characters and plots that prioritise pure, intense emotion over reason and rationality. Early variation of the contemporary romance novel.

Tactile poetics: Poetic technique that involves emphasis on touch and descriptions of tactile connection and palpable sensation. See Girten 2018.

Romantic pedestrianism: An element common in Romantic literature which involved elevating the act of walking to become an emotionally, spiritually and aesthetically connected practice, and source of artistic inspiration. See Bredar 2019.

Endnotes

1. Henceforth referred to as *Vindication*. ↑
2. Henceforth referred to as 'To the Moon'. ↑
3. Henceforth referred to as 'Churchyard'. ↑
4. While Nagle defines Romantic Sensibility as the prioritisation of emotions in general, in my exploration of feminine Romanticism, I define

feminine Sensibility as Berges and Wollstonecraft do (around specifically passionate, physical emotions such as desire, lust, and fear or anxiety). I will therefore use the terms 'sensibility' and 'passion' interchangeably in this article as Wollstonecraft and Berges do, within the specific context of feminine Romanticism. ↑

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