The Rules of Conduct for Cultivated Ladies in Jane Austen's Time

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Abstract:

There is no doubt that Jane Austen is one of the most studied authors of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Her female characters have been extensively studied and they seem to have aroused much interest as manifestations of the conduct of their time. Her heroines have realized that there were many mistakes in the rules of conduct that controlled and restricted their behaviors. Thus, they have found no fault in correcting these mistakes, by behaving naturally without acting. Elizabeth Bennet the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* and Marianne Dashwood of Sense and Sensibility are the chosen examples of that kind of women.

قواعد السلوك للنساء المتحضرات في زمن جين اوستن

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المستخلص:

ليس هنالك شك في أن جين اوستن هي من أكثر كُتاب (نهاية القرن الثامن عشر وبداية القرن التاسع عشر) دراسةً. حيث تتم دراسة شخصياتها النسوية على نطاق واسع لما تثيره تلك الشخصيات من اهتمام كبير كونهن رموزاً لقواعد السلوك التي كانت سائدة في زمنهن. أدركت بطلات اوستن أن هناك الكثير من الأخطاء في قواعد السلوك التي تسيطر عليهن و تقييد تصرفاتهن، لذلك لم يجدن ضيراً في تصحيح تلك الأخطاء عن طريق التصرف بصورة طبيعية من غير تمثيل. اليزابيث بينيت بطلة "كبرياء و هوىٍ" و ماريان داشوود بطلة "عقل وعاطفة" هما مثالان لذلك النوع من النساء.

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Throughout centuries women were living under special restricted conditions. They were following special conducts imposed upon them by the rules of their society. The most important conduct that was expected from every lady was to be submissive, and the only available option for any lady was to marry. The British literature of the late 18th century and early 19th century, while enormously entertaining, can be considered as a guide for the reader to the manners and mores of the time. There were basic rules of etiquette for every member in that society especially for the ladies: for example, it was unacceptable for an unmarried lady to be seen in the company of a man without a chaperone, except for a walk to church or a park in the early morning, and she might not walk alone. Under no circumstances might a lady call upon a gentleman alone unless she was consulting that gentleman on a business matter. It was improper for a lady to wear pearls or diamonds in the morning. In parties, a lady must not dance more than three dances with the same partner.[1] And many other rules of conduct that constrained women to behave in a way contrary to what they really wanted.

In the 18th century, some promising changes had happened in the English society like the emergence of a new kind of society known as the polite society. As there was a demand for a new elegance of personal presentation in terms of movement and dress as well as ease of social manner and polishness in conversation, a conversation without constraint between people of different ranks, origins, religions, or political backgrounds became principal ideal of polite society. It was the influence of this period that brought about a lasting change in cultivation and manners in England.[2] And among the middle class families of 18th century England, there appeared an important term, "genteel", a quality of being civilized: marked by refinement in taste, manners and cultivated speech. It was a "fundamental importance to middling people but one which was not directly linked to wealth or income, in that one could be quite poor and still genteel or quite wealthy and not genteel at all."[3] During the late 18th century , for example, if a woman considered herself to be genteel, then she had few acceptable options for earning money if the

need aroused. This circumstance often pressured women of the gentry class into marriage for the sake of financial security. By the end of the 18th century, the idea of the genteel began to open up in contradictory ways. It expanded in different directions: money, fashion, and manners, and the rules of etiquette were clearly defined.[4] However, the most important event of the 18th century was the education of women. Thus, in response to those changes, women writers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, produced literature designed to guide young women safely and happily through the steps of conduct.

Jane Austen (1775-1817), one of the premier authors of her time, wrote about women and the conditions in which they lived. Due to the narrow scope of her works, Austen was able to show the standards of 18th and 19th centuries society, and how women were living in "a situation in which they had no status except as a daughter and a wife, and where, if she were deprived of her belief that marriage was both a worthy ambition and her salvation, she would be deprived of life"[5]

Austen's novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) focused upon day-to-day conduct and manners of cultivated ladies in the English society of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and the familiar themes of love and marriage.

he English women of Austen's time were believed to be sociable without familiarity, and condescending with dignity, lively, unreserved, and intelligent; they were not without that modesty which heightened every charm, and added dignity to every other trait. It was society that encouraged young women "to exercise gamesmanship instead of honesty, to control rather than to share, and to live through others rather than to find their own fulfillment."[6] This can be clearly shown in Austen's women. First, Austen examined the financial pressures on women to marry. In the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, she wrote, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of good fortune, must be in want of a wife."[7] In fact, Austen ironically meant the contrary, that a single woman, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was in want of a man with a good fortune. In Austen's little world, marriage

was the only honorable choice for a cultivated young lady, especially if she has a small fortune. Otherwise she becomes a governess.

Not only the financial pressures, but it was also the severe restrictive laws and customs of 18th and 19th century England that made women consider marriage a means of stability and made women even more dependent on men. For instance, women were deprived of inheritance. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet's inheritance, would have gone to Mr. Collins, his cousin, leaving his wife and five daughters poor and homeless upon his death. As for the Dashwoods in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Dashwood's son in law has inherited the estate of Norland, leaving Mr. dashwood's wife and daughters with very little to live with. Through these examples, Austen showed that "patriarchal control of women depended on women being denied the right to earn or even inherit their own money."[8]

For these reasons, good marriages were extremely uncommon. However, we can see that Jane Austen has based her novels on the idea that a successful marriage can be made when there is a fundamental belief between the man and women that is they are partners, who must base their relationship on friendship, love, and esteem. The relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is the best example of this idea. When Darcy told Elizabeth Bennet that he loved her despite "his sense of her inferiority,"(*Pride*. 159) Elizabeth confidently told him that, even though he was rich and powerful, she "had not known [him] a month before,[she] felt [he] was the last man in the world whom [she] could ever be prevailed to marry."(*Pride*. 162) A rich man in Darcy's position would not expect a firm reply from a young lady such as the one of Elizabeth. In such situation, a lady must accept the 'insult' with a smile. Whereas Elizabeth never felt ashamed telling him that she would not marry him even if he "was the last man in the world." She refused him because of his wrong ideals.

It is until Darcy has realized that he and Elizabeth are equals to each other - both are intelligent, both are articulate and both are proud and prejudiced – that Elizabeth becomes able to give up her prejudice against him. Through her portrait of Elizabeth and Darcy, Austen made the reader believe in the possibility of love and identity, the chance for true love.[9]

Middle class women in the 18th and 19th centuries were not encouraged to think of themselves as real members of society. Social decorum taught women "to practice propriety instead of displaying their intelligence, to practice self-denial instead of cultivating self-assertion, and to think of themselves collectively, in terms of universals of the sex, instead of contemplating individual autonomy, talents, and capacities or rights."[10] In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne referred to this idea when she remarked, "I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful—[and] talked only of the weather and the roads..."[11] It is apparent that, when writing the book, Austen herself was taken by "her attraction to Marianne's sincerity and spontaneity."[12] Social decorum requires Marianne to be dull, yet she is intelligent enough to recognize that fact, thus she has preferred to be sincere to herself by going against the wrong decorum.

Jane Austen has satirized the universal standard of false values: her books have expressed a general view of life, the moral-realistic view. Group of critics have regarded Jane Austen as having a rigid and conventional sense of values. Andrew H. Wright says:

> **[Jane Austen] lived, it is true, in a small and very secure world, in which values were not questioned: nothing got dragged up. Her unperplexity – or the resentment it arouses – is perhaps at the root of many objections to her.[13]**

Katharine M. Roger's, in *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (1982), discussed the progress women writers, like Austen, made in the 18th century. Like them, Austen focused on intelligent young women, through whose eyes she presented women, men, and the world.[14] And she also showed that those women were strong enough to declare their disbelief in the rules of conduct that ruled their lives.

To show women breaking norms of the end of 18th century is very difficult in the eye of the 21st century viewer. There are both objective and subjective causes. To the objective ones, it must be mentioned that the norms have greatly changed. The acts that might

have seemed revolutionary at the beginning of the 19th century, escape the notice of nowadays spectator as being anything very special. For example, one of the most important features that distinguishes Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, from other heroines, is her impertinence, as Elizabeth states it in her dialogue with Mr. Darcy:

> **'Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?'**
> **'For the liveliness of your mind, I did.'**
> **'You may as well call it impertinence at once. It was very little less."(*Pride*. 313)**

In the 19th century the word 'impertinent' meant presumptuous and/or over-familiar, as stated by Myra Stokes in her analysis of "The Language of Jane Austen".[15] At the turn of the 19th century to be impertinent was a serious break of the accepted social rules. Critic Jane Fergus states it: "To be impertinent, the reverse of the compliant and submissive behavior recommended to young ladies, and not to suffer for it, is figuratively to get away with murder."[16] Critic Rebecca Dickson enlarges the topic:

> **There was also the problem of image. When Austen was alive, a woman who did not act in a submissive, domestic manner was assumed to be of a lower social order; therefore gentlewomen tried to act in a dignified manner that bespoke their cultivated civility…. Gentlewoman kept their unhappiness about their place in the socioeconomic hierarchy to themselves or discretely shared complaints with female friends in letters or in private conversations. Women were extremely careful about their social personas; they did not want anyone to describe them as indolent or shrill because indolence and shrillness were associated with the working classes.[17]**

The best that Jane Austen could do was to allow her female protagonist to be impertinent- too bold and straightforward.

> **Elizabeth notoriously acts and judges independently and thereby violates many of the norms for proper female behavior, but instead of finding herself**

> **ostracized by society, she becomes mistress of Pemberley, achieving the highest social position and greatest wealth that Austen ever bestows upon her heroines.[18]**

It is a paradox that though in Jane Austen's years of life her Elizabeth was characterized as even vulgar by contemporaries, now, having no deeper knowledge of the time, it is almost impossible to understand in what way Elizabeth proves herself to be impertinent. She seems just brave and witty, very open and not a hypocrite. Neither her direct and brave answers to Lady Catherine, nor her teasing conversation with Darcy seem impertinent. If these scenes do not receive special attention, the impertinence of Elizabeth, forming one of the most important character lines, is revealed inadequately. Elizabeth's walk on foot to Netherlands is a liberty that does not seem revolutionary at all. In the novel, we are informed: "that she should have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley; and Elizabeth was convinced that they held her in contempt for it."(*Pride*. 29-30)

As the reader together with Elizabeth hardly may have high esteem of the mentioned ladies, their attitude does not set an example. Due to the confinements society placed on women, Austen's heroines looked to different activities not only for enjoyment but also for freedom. Activities like needlework, sketching, music, visiting, or even walking alone, sometimes these ladies used those activities to gain freedom from the strictures of society. Country walking was Austen's principal symbol of freedom because, during that time, a minor rule of propriety prohibited young ladies from taking solitary walks. Thus, when Elizabeth went on a solitary three-mile walk, she was symbolically asserting her freedom and independence from the rigidity of social codes. Another way of asserting freedom in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne freed herself from engaging in frivolous and sometimes degrading conversations by playing the piano, by sketching silhouettes, by reading poetry, or by taking walks.[19]

Working with materials extremely limited in themselves, Jane Austen develops themes of the broadest significance; the novels go beyond social record, beneath the didactic, to moral –concern, perplexity, and commitment. She does not seek to instruct her

readers; her aim is to draw a picture that would amuse them. Within the narrow limits which she sets herself, she achieves a finished realism, with qualities of the highest wit and elegance.[20] Although their options were limited and unpromising, Austen's women were not forced to marry. Furthermore, although all of them ultimately chose to marry, Austen's heroines made the reader believe that they might not have married, like Austen herself, and "yet lived, within the narrow limits of their confining society, purposeful and interesting lives."[21]

In short, nearly all Jane Austen's readers, admirers and detractors see in her choice of subject matter a deliberate limitation, a smallness of range. But those who like her find her scope adequate to the exposition of important themes; those who dislike her complain that the country gentry cannot possibly yield anything of surpassing value. Jane Austen's novel are too complex to allow a merely didactic interpretation, too serious to be dismissed as simply light-hearted: "she contemplates virtues, not as fixed quantities, or as definable qualities, but as continual struggles and conquests, as progressive states of mind, advancing by repulsing their contraries, or losing ground by being overcome."[22] It must be remembered also that she can assume a good deal of knowledge in her reader; like most 18th century authors, she writes for contemporaries and assumes an audience of intellectual and social equality.[23]

Jane Austen belongs in spirit to the 18th century. Yet, she speaks with, and to, a growing number of women. In the midst of a period of social and economical adjustment, she is able to do so because she speaks to women with a feminine narrative voice, signifying the verbal emergence of a female consciousness, her ideal in her novel clearly corresponds to the idea of polite women representing civility, courtesy, tolerance, good taste and education. Because of her awareness, her talent, and her ability to get her work published, Austen not only has something of interest to say, but she also has the means by which to articulate it, she has a voice, a vision, and a pen.

Notes:

[1] "Niceties and Courtesies: Manners and Customs in the time of Jane Austen." http://chuma.cas.usf.edu/~runge/MasonJA1.html Retrieved Dec. 17th 2009.

[2] Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979). 10.

[3] See http://www.thefreedictionary.com/gentry Retrieved March 5th 2010.

[4] Katri Sirkel, "Various Aspects of the English Gentleman in Jane Austen's Novels *Sense and Sensibility, Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*" (M.A. Thesis, University of Tartu, 2005), 39.

[5] Jenny Dean, "Jane Austen and the Female Condition: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century England," http://www.uah.edu/colleges/liberal/education/S1998/jennyd.html#Austen's%20Writing Retrieved Dec. 16th 2009.

[6] Quoted in Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, *The Female Hero* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1981), 119. See Jenny Dean.

[7] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* www.feedbooks.com/book/52. p.4 Retrieved March 6th 2010. Henceforward, all references to the book will be to this edition, therefore only page number(s) are parenthetically cited within the text.

[8] Quoted in Sandra M Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Have: Yale University Press, 1979), 136. See Jenny Dean.

[9] Jenny Dean.

[10] Quoted in Mary Poovey, *Persuasion and the Promises of Lover* Ed. Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 155. See Jenny Dean.

[11] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* http://www.feedbooks.com Retrieved March 6th 2010. p.40. Henceforward, all references to the book will be to this edition, therefore only page number(s) are parenthetically cited within the text.

[12] Quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, 157.

[13] Quoted in Andrew H. Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 25.

[14] Diane M. Counts, "Jane Austen's Powers of Consciousness" (M.A. thesis, University of Marshall, 2003), 9.

[15] Quoted in Myra Stokes, *The Language of Jane Austen* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 106. See Antra Leine, "Treatment of Jane Austen's Independent Heroines in the Films of 1940, 1979, and 1995" (M. A. Thesis, University of Latvia, 2003), 1.

[16] Quoted in Jane Fergus, *Jan Austen: A Literary Life* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1992), 83. See Leine. 1.

[17] Quoted in Ibid.

[18] Quoted in Ibid., 2.
[19] Quoted in Jenny Dean.
[20] Emile Legouis, *A Short History of the English Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), 298.
[21] Quoted in Jenny Dean.
[22] Wright, 34.
[23] Ibid., 26.

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