THE *VINDICATIONS*, *EMMA,* AND *THE WOMAN OF COLOUR*: FEMININIST APPROPRIATIONS OF ABOLITIONIST LANGUAGE

by

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(Under the Direction of Casie LeGette)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the tradition of British authors appropriating abolitionist language for the sake of feminist arguments. It provides a brief historical context of the feminist and abolitionist movements in Britain in the long eighteenth century before establishing Mary Wollstonecraft as the founder of this tradition, as she uses the language of colonial slavery for feminist goals in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This thesis locates the anonymous author of *The Woman of Colour: A Tale* and Jane Austen, in *Emma*, as Wollstonecraft's successors in this tradition. Ultimately, this thesis argues that all three authors aim to promote both feminist ideas and abolitionist ones at once. Nonetheless, the abstraction of the language of slavery does not allow the texts to treat feminism and abolitionism with equal importance as it necessarily distances readers from the contemporary realities of the slave trade.

INDEX WORDS: Eighteenth Century Literature, Long Eighteenth Century, Nineteenth Century Literature, *The Woman of Colour*, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, *Emma,* Abolition, Feminism, Colonial Slavery, *A Vindication of*

the Rights of Woman, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men,* British Literature

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Craig and Jana Richt. Thank you for always supporting me. I would not be here without you.

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CHAPTER 1

THE RISE OF FEMINISM AND ABOLITIONISM IN THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: A BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the question of the abolition of the slave trade was at the forefront of British political thought. This movement rose in popularity in the same political moment in which the rights of women were publicly examined, and the two movements were often grouped together in contemporary politics. In my work, I explore the overlap between the abolitionist and feminist movements of this time particularly through literature of the early nineteenth century. To do so, I first provide a brief historical introduction in which I argue that the distinct role that British women played in the abolitionist movement connected the two issues in the mind of the British people, particularly in the minds of those women who fought for abolition. Because of this deep interconnectedness, many white women fought for their own rights using abolitionist language, comparing states of female economic dependence such as marriage or governessing to literal enslavement. Though, as my work will prove, white women often privileged the fight for their own rights over that of the enslaved people whom their language was intended for, these women intended to argue for both issues at the same time.

As the framework for my argument, I will first discuss Mary Wollstonecraft's political essays, *The Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as they explicitly encapsulate this superimposing of interests in non-fiction texts. Through the lens of Wollstonecraft's work, I will then discuss the phenomenon in the anonymously written novel,

The Woman of Colour: A Tale (1808) and Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815). Examining these texts alongside one another allows for a nuanced reading of the use of abolitionist language for both feminist and abolitionist purposes. I draw attention to the different angles from which each author approaches these intersections and provide a chronological study of the feminist tradition of using abolitionist language to promote both feminism and abolitionism.

While I believe my work is unique in its pairing of these specific works together in a unified argument, other scholars have compared some of these works with one another and discussed the tradition of this same language in each of the texts. As a general trend, most of these postcolonial critics have categorized these authors as either radical or conservative in their stance on the abolition of the slave trade. For instance, Eileen Hunt Botting discusses how Wollstonecraft's Eurocentric tendencies limit her arguments while Anne Mellor emphasizes Wollstonecraft's radical feminist and abolitionist beliefs[1]. Similarly, Lyndon Dominique and Sara Salih characterize *The Woman of Colour* as a progressive depiction of abolitionism while Kristina Huang and Olivia Carpenter grapple with the ameliorist approach to abolition that the novel takes along with its imperialist influences[2]. Additionally, Claudia Johnson, Helena Kelley, and G. White all position Austen as progressive for her time, if not explicitly abolitionist[3]. However, Edward Said and Patricia Matthew see Austen's references to slavery as very much a product of her time and not necessarily progressive[4]. My argument, instead of deeming a text or

[1] "From Revolutionary Paris to Nootka Sound to Saint-Dominique…" (2022); " Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft" (1995)
[2] "They Came Before and After Olivia…" (2022); "Pre-Emancipation Stories of Race" (2011); "'Ameliorating the Situation' of Empire…" (2022); "'Rendered Remarkable…'" (2021)
[3] *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988); *Jane Austen, The Secret Radical* (2017); "Emma: Autonomy and Abolition…" (2005)
[4] *Culture and Imperialism* (1994); "Jane Austen and the Abolitionist Turn" (2019)

author wholly progressive or conservative, emphasizes the ambivalence of these texts, discussing the political nuances of works that seek to promote both feminism and abolitionism and the limits of these political aims.

During the long eighteenth century, the ethics behind the rapidly expanding slave trade were questioned on a national scale as "the view that the trade in slaves was a national sin emerged in the 1770s and then spread rapidly, growing to become an intellectual and ethical current that ran through society and carried the abolitionist movement forward" (Olusoga 200). One of the main events in British abolitionist history that spearheaded this movement occurred just decades before Wollstonecraft's vindications were published. In 1772, James Somerset, a formerly enslaved man in Virginia, escaped from Charles Stewart, his enslaver who had brought him to London. Somerset was then recaptured and placed on board a ship which was set to sail to Jamaica as his captors intended to force him into Jamaican plantation slavery. However, before the ship set sail, Somerset contacted his white godparents who then secured him a writ of habeas corpus, preventing his departure from England without a legal settlement. Stewart argued that by escaping with his own person, Somerset infringed upon his property rights. These events set in motion a groundbreaking case, a legal battle over British property rights, a sacred concept at the time, and the question of slavery on English soil. The case was ruled upon by Lord Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield, and though he tried to limit the scope of his ruling to only apply to this specific case, public interest in both the abolition and the continuation of slavery made this impossible.

Mansfield eventually ruled in Somerset's favor, insisting that he had to be set free since British law did not contain a positive law affirming slavery on British soil. According to historian David Olusoga, the wide reporting and misreporting of this case suggested that this case, despite only asserting the freedom of one specific man, was widely viewed as applicable to

all enslaved people on British soil. Though the slave trade was not abolished until 1807 and the separate issue of the abolition of British slavery as a whole was not settled until 1833, Mansfield's ruling on the Somerset case set a legal precedent for Britain; namely, that colonial rule could not be enforced in England and that English law did not explicitly protect the right to own slaves in its definition of property rights.

While the Somerset case was revolutionary because of its implication for formerly enslaved people, this case is also particularly useful to illustrate the overlap between abolitionism and feminism in this era as, in his defense of slavery, the lawyer defending Stewart, the slave owner in this case, "argued that slavery, *like marriage,* was a 'municipal' rather than a 'natural' relationship. Lord Mansfield did not reject this equation. In this argument, both slavery and marriage were constructed by legal custom" (Mellor 346). This case was focused solely on the legality of slavery in a specific context, but, even so, the woman question made its appearance within the rhetoric of the same courtrooms where major abolitionist debates were in motion. With both the question of the legal position of British women, especially married women, and the question of the legality and morality of the slave trade at the forefront of British politics, these issues seem to have been lumped together in the minds of many British authors. Married women were subjected to coverture laws, "the common law idea that during marriage a husband's authority and legal identity covered his wife's" (Kesselring & Stretton 3) and had been for centuries. Just as the Mansfield Decision determined how many enslaved people saw their status on British soil, "legal arenas have long served as sites to set, contest, and make public the limits on women's rights to personal autonomy, physical integrity, property, citizenship, and custody over their children" (Kesselring & Stretton 4). At the same time that British courts

grappled with the legality of slavery, they were also deciding the legal rights of British women through the questioning and enforcement of these coverture laws.

Coverture laws applied specifically to married women as "it was within marriage that the law most rigorously entrenched the subordination of women to men" (Kesselring & Stretton 4). Upon marriage, a woman's land was effectively under the control of her husband, and she was unable to perform most legal tasks including: making a contract, writing a will, or the right to sue. These laws also, in essence, provided a man with a sexual monopoly over his wife's body. This lack of agency of married women under coverture is one of the reasons why marriage is so pointedly targeted by early English feminists such as Wollstonecraft. However, it is also important to note that coverture laws, by their very nature, had implications for all British women regardless of marital status. Of course, there was some nuance to how coverture laws affected individual women depending on their location and resources, but my point is to highlight the legal situation of British women at this moment. Laws that eclipsed a wife's identity within her husband's were not dissolved until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much later than the works I discuss.

The correlation between the discussion of the rights of women and enslaved people during this time is especially interesting when viewed in relation to women's role in the abolitionist movement. British women were a heavily involved demographic in the abolitionist movement as "it was willing to free the enormous amount of intellect and energy that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was bottled up within the women of Britain" (Olusoga 213). Whether or not this was a result of the similar ways in which contemporary thought considered feminism and slavery, I cannot say, but British women were, in fact, some of the key defenders of the abolitionist movement in England. As Anne K. Mellor points out, some of the earliest anti-

slavery societies were started by the Quakers, and “women played a major role in these [anti-slavery] societies and became leading figures in the social protests against the slave trade” (Mellor 349).

Though politics were largely inaccessible to women during this time, the abolitionist movement’s focus on empathy, mercy, and keeping families together, rendered it a feminine movement in the eyes of the British public. Accessing the limited political resources available to them, such as organizing and signing petitions and raising money, women were distinctly influential in the movement. Women also acted on their political beliefs in what was considered their domestic sphere, their homes. Mellor references the female-lead sugar boycotts which protested the inhuman treatment of enslaved people on British-owned sugar plantations in the colonies; women took physical action by banning sugar from their households, placing themselves at the center of the political movement against slavery.

Historian Linda Colley argues that England was imbibed with a culture of captivity, that amidst their own part in the trade of enslaved African people, British people as a whole were aware of the dangers of captivity and realized that they were not immune to its effects. This idea is useful for describing the correlation between abolitionism and feminism in nineteenth century thought. Though the degree of captivity which married British women and physically enslaved people experienced are incomparable, contemporary politics seems to have defined them within the same spectrum. That is, though enslaved Africans were undeniably less free than British women, because contemporary thinkers recognized both situations as forms of captivity, the questions were often approached in relation to one another.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are situated directly within this interconnection. She approaches the issues of chattel slavery and women's rights as two sides of the same coin; in her case for women's rights, she argues for racial equality, and vice versa. As such, I argue that Wollstonecraft's use of colonial slavery as an analogy to the plights of women provides the framework for later female novelists to make similar moves through fictionalized accounts in the early nineteenth century. Olusoga highlights the abolitionist importance of the revelation of the horrors of slavery to the British public as a move to garner sympathy for the movement. Abolitionists exposed real conditions that enslaved people endured with diagrams of how slaves were transported across the Atlantic and first-hand accounts of enslaved people. Though surely weakening her abolitionist arguments by subverting the language of slavery for use in her feminist claims, I insist that Wollstonecraft, in her mentioning of specific instances common in physical slavery, is employing the abolitionist tactic of drawing attention to the injustices of the slave trade while simultaneously using this tactic as a way to expose the realities of female dependency.

Because my work largely depends on Wollstonecraft's influence, it is important to note the wide reception of her twin vindications. *Vindication of the Rights of Men* made waves in the British political environment as one of the first responses to Burke's criticism of the French revolutionary activity, but I am also interested in Wollstonecraft's influence outside of Britain. Although she originally published the piece anonymously, Eileen Hunt Botting shows that excerpts from the *Rights of Men* were published in periodicals in the then English colony of Jamaica in 1791. Botting also provides evidence for the political influence of Wollstonecraft's work circulating within the colony just months before the massive slave revolt in the French sugar colony of Saint-Dominique in August of 1791, an event which is now referred to as the

Haitian Revolution. Further than just "the 'common wind of the reports of the rise of slave unrest in the broader post-revolutionary Caribbean''" ("Wollstonecraft in Jamaica" 1311), there is evidence that Wollstonecraft's ideas had a reception in Jamaica. This suggests that in addition to commenting on the major abolitionist and feminist events of her time, Wollstonecraft and her work may well have influenced them.

The presence of Wollstonecraft's Jamaican influence is particularly interesting to me as I will focus later on the dynamics of abolitionist language alongside feminist language in *The Woman of Colour,* which centers on the fictional biracial daughter (Olivia Fairfield) of a white, English sugar plantation owner and a black woman enslaved on his plantation in Jamaica. Though the nationality of *The Woman of Colour's* author is unknown, it can be assumed that the author had some knowledge of Jamaican politics given the novel's Jamaican heroine. Botting's argument therefore provides an interesting framework for viewing the novel in relation to Wollstonecraft's arguments as it places Olivia Fairfield and her author directly in the wake of Wollstonecraft's influence.

Countless critics have already discussed the feminist critiques present in Jane Austen's works, and it is not a revolutionary idea to link Austen and her multiple novels to Wollstonecraft although Austen would not have associated herself with the scandal that came with supporting Wollstonecraft during her time[5]. Claudia Johnson asserts this point in her introduction to *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*: "Although many novels written from the beginning until the end of Austen's career referred positively or negatively to *The Rights of Woman,* no

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[5] As Johnson asserts, "No woman novelist, even among the most progressive, wished to be discredited with Mary Wollstonecraft, particularly after Godwin's widely attacked *Memoirs* disclosed details about her sexual improprieties and suicide attempts" (Johnson xxiii)

allusions were necessary to remind audiences that female characterization, such as Emma's or Fanny's, was already a politicized issue in and of itself" (Johnson xxiii). Regardless of the fact that there is no definitive proof of Austen reading Wollstonecraft's vindications, many of the ideas surrounding women that Wollstonecraft expresses show up in Austen's works[6]. I will focus on Austen as one of Wollstonecraft's literary heirs in her work, *Emma*, through her use of the language of slavery to describe a woman's position within marriage and her emphasis on intellectual "enslavement" in the novel.

I am also far from the first to examine Austen's work within the context of colonial slavery and imperialism. Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* famously examined the imperialism present at the periphery of Austen's *Mansfield Park* through a character's connection to a plantation in Antigua. Said argues that Austen's works, as well as any other novels written within the context of empire, are inseparable from the imperialism of their time. Though Austen does not directly address the slave trade, colonial slavery was a fixture of Austen's time, thus her works cannot altogether escape it. Johnson reads Austen's references to slavery as intentional as well as peripheral. She argues that during this period, "novels by women were acknowledged to express and mobilize political opinions …" (Johnson xv), and with this logic, she sees Austen's novels as sub-textually addressing political stances including abolitionism. Though Austen does not focus on the politics of the slave trade in her discussion of *Emma,* I argue that *Emma*'s disruption of a metaphor comparing slavery to the female difficulties

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[6] For instance, Johnson reads Austen's comments on female education in Mansfield Park as a connection t0 Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman.*

of governessing and marriage within the text is a subtle disruption of the idea that the two topics are comparable.

In recent years, there has been a trend of examining Austen's works within this postcolonial, anti-imperialist viewpoint[7]. Critics like Said have focused mainly on *Mansfield Park,* in which the patriarch of the central family leaves his family to visit a plantation he is connected with in Antigua, and *Sanditon*[8], Austen's unfinished novel that features her only mixed-race character. Though, as my sources reveal, I am not the first to do so,[9] I intend to apply this same branch of criticism to Austen's *Emma,* a novel that has been less centered in this strand of criticism. Though the presence of the slave trade is less explicit in *Emma* than it is in its marginal presence in both *Mansfield Park* and *Sanditon*, *Emma* includes a direct mention of the slave trade through one character's employment of the motif of the slave trade to make a point about female agency. Thus, I position *Emma* in Wollstonecraft's literary lineage alongside *The Woman of Colour*, a lineage that grapples with the problems of slavery and women's rights concurrently, often describing one in terms of the other.

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[7] Patricia Matthew describes the need for this type of criticism in "Jane Austen and the Abolitionist Turn."

[8] For an example of criticism of *Sanditon*, see Salih, Sara. "The Silence of Miss Lambe: Sanditon and Fictions of 'Race' in the Abolition Era." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2006, pp. 329–53. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1353/ecf.2006.0049.

[9] One of the most recent works in this line of criticism is Lyndon Dominique's commentary on political blackness in Austen and other works in which he mentions *The Woman of Colour*, "They Came before and after Olivia: Cats, Black Ladies and Political Blackness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Austen." Dominique reads Fanny of *Mansfield Park* as a blackened white woman and focuses on the concept of political blackness, "instances in which white writers use literary tropes of blackness- specifically tropes of blackness that involve black and white women - in ways that do not directly relate to anti-slavery, yet are still doing the work of undoing systemic forms of oppression" (They Came 262-263).

CHAPTER 2

WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *VINDICATIONS*: "THE MORE SPECIOUS SLAVERY"

Although Mary Wollstonecraft was not the first British woman to address the plight of women through the language of slavery, scholars such as Moira Ferguson argue that Wollstonecraft's mention of slavery is "distinctly recontextualized in terms of colonial slavery" (Ferguson 83). In her direct abolitionist remarks and in her metaphors drawing attention to the struggles of women, she evokes British slavery in particular. When "Wollstonecraft infects slavery with the orthodox conception of slavery that had populated women's text for over a century – marriage was a form of slavery; wives were slaves to husbands" (Ferguson 83), she is also drawing attention to the national sin of the slave trade. Wollstonecraft does talk about slavery more abstractly when she mentions biblical and classical references to slavery[10], but the majority of her slave-master metaphors are situated within the context of the contemporary English discourse of abolition. "For her major polemic, that is, Mary Wollstonecraft decided to adopt and adapt the terms of contemporary political debate" (Ferguson 82); the abolitionist movement acts as a context for both Wollstonecraft's abolitionist and feminist critiques. Though, as I explored earlier, slavery and women's rights were often brought up as conjoining arguments, Wollstonecraft "seems to have been the first writer to raise issues of colonial and gender relations so tellingly in tandem" (Ferguson 87). Wollstonecraft goes farther than mentioning the

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[10] For instance, Wollstonecraft asserts that "[women are] Educated then in worse than Egyptian bondage…" (Rights *of Women* 246).

two topics in relation to each other; she fights for both issues using language of the abolitionist movement.

As with all language that abstracts slavery to condemn another concept, Wollstonecraft's arguments lose some of their abolitionist force when feminism is prioritized over abolitionism. Her arguments, though progressive for her time, are still embedded with inherent biases about women and about non-white/non-European people. Botting talks about this in terms of Wollstonecraft's orientalist stereotypes which are used to exemplify the worst forms of oppression, but I think Wollstonecraft's biases extend further than Botting argues. Though Wollstonecraft attempts to fight for both women's rights and the rights of enslaved people in her vindications, she still ultimately privileges Protestant European ideology as the logic behind her arguments. Though Botting is referring to Wollstonecraft's orientalist attitudes here, I argue that this statement ultimately rings true for Wollstonecraft's use of slavery as a metaphor as well: "international politics and prejudice shaped Wollstonecraft's theory of equal rights and her application of it to people and cultures beyond those of Western Protestant Europe" ("From Revolutionary Paris" 46). While I insist upon Wollstonecraft's intention of promoting both feminism and abolitionism, when talking about the issues in tandem, I argue that she does not value abolitionism as equal to feminism given her Eurocentric standards.

Wollstonecraft's first vindication, The *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) is a heated response to Edmund Burke's commentary on the revolutions in France. She gives him the epithet "the right honorable" before arguing that his ideas which privilege the aristocracy and tradition over reason are anything but. Though Wollstonecraft seems to write the letter with the primary purpose of addressing class and property disparity, she includes enslaved people in the category of those who are slighted by England's hierarchical society, imploring that the God-given right

of the equality of mankind is founded on reason while prejudice is a corrupting force which stems from the shallow traditions of the past. Thus, the *Rights of Men* is an openly abolitionist political essay. Wollstonecraft constantly draws attention to the issue of slavery through asides to the reality of the slave trade, but within her abolitionist discourse, she also frequently co-opts the language of slavery to describe other forms of societal oppression.

Early in *The Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft criticizes Burke's support for the continuation of slavery:

> Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, the slave trade ought never to be abolished, because our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion (Rights *of Men* 44).

Here, she points out the irony of Burke's advocacy for the human right to private property because, in insisting that the abolition of slavery would disrupt the Englishman's security of property, Burke defines enslaved people as property and infringes upon their freedom. In other words, if Burke is truly fighting for the rights of the British people, Wollstonecraft argues that he cannot value the slave owners' right to own slaves over the slaves' right to freedom and autonomy. In a sentiment that mocks those who were on the side of Stewart during the Somerset case, she continues, "security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty" (*Rights of Men* 44). Wollstonecraft points to the unsustainability of a definition of freedom that is inseparable from property rights, particularly one that views human beings as merchandise.

Yet, even among her direct depictions and detestations of colonial slavery, Wollstonecraft still borrows the language of slavery to address issues other than the slave trade itself. This is a model for how she treats the concept of slavery when she applies it to women in *The Rights of Woman*. She writes to Burke, “I glow with indignation when I attempt, methodically, to unravel your slavish paradoxes” (*Rights of Men* 38). She insists that Burke uses *slavish* paradoxes, paradoxes that are unoriginal and entirely dependent upon the historical laws of England. Wollstonecraft means to attack the validity of Burke’s argument, but through her word choice, she unintentionally projects a negative connotation onto enslaved people. She positions Burke’s ideas as slaves who dare not disobey the master of England’s established aristocracy, but this comparison fails to account for actual enslaved peoples’ lack of agency. Burke has the power to change his ideas; he has the freedom which he aims to deny others, thus Burke’s paradoxes are more at liberty than the enslaved people whom they define as property. In criticizing Burke’s ideas by calling them *slavish,* Wollstonecraft promotes the idea that slaves are responsible for their dependence on their enslavers. In a similar vein, Wollstonecraft calls Burke “the slave of impulse” (*Rights of Men* 57). Here, she is not talking of oppression of any sort, but rather of Burke’s lack of self-control and reason. If Burke is enslaved by his appetites, Wollstonecraft argues that is entirely of his own doing. She inadvertently equates the lack of agency of literal slaves with the lack of power she thinks Burke has over his selfish nature as a wealthy Englishman. She equates the oppressor with the oppressed.

Though this text is not primarily aimed at women, Wollstonecraft shows the inseparability of feminism and abolitionism in her mind when she brings up the role of British women in the slave trade. She questions, “where is the dignity, the infallible sensibility, in the fair ladies, whom, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive negroes curse in all the

agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent?" (*Rights of Men* 79). Here, Wollstonecraft uses the contemporary context of the impact of female abolitionists to implicate her fellow British women. The British women that abuse enslaved people are, by cultural standards for female behavior, less feminine than the abolitionists who practice empathy and sensibility in their treatment of enslaved people. It is hypocritical, Wollstonecraft shows, for women to be praised for their delicate sensibilities and decorum while they perpetrate the same, if not worse, atrocities against enslaved people that men do. Since abolitionism is one of the main political agendas that women can take up in Wollstonecraft's society, she does not exclude women, even those who are oppressed in the position that they hold in society, from her reprimands. In fact, this aside to the behavior of women places a special emphasis on female behavior within the abolitionist movement. Her condemnation of white women extends to *The Rights of Women* – not only in their complacency in the slave trade but also their complacency in their own captivity.

Ironically, while the *Rights of Men* speaks directly against the practice of colonial slavery, and is a text about the equality of mankind, *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* (1792), a text that is not centered on an abolitionist cause, employs substantially more references to slavery. According to Ferguson's count, "*Rights of Men* refers to slavery in a variety of contexts only four or five times, the Rights of Woman contains over eighty references" (Ferguson 82). The fact that Wollstonecraft speaks more about slavery in a text dedicated to decrying the state of British women than she does in a text partially allocated to abolitionism, shows just how prevalent this metaphor is within Wollstonecraft's feminist discourse.

This text, like *The Rights of Men*, is an abolitionist text in the sense that it deliberately draws her reader's attention to the reality of slavery in some segments of her arguments.

Wollstonecraft delves into the realities of the slave trade with purposeful, contextualized asides on the British slave trade. However, these literal examples are almost immediately followed by Wollstonecraft's thoughts about how this oppression relates to the maltreatment of women as she favors "a discourse on slavery that highlighted female subjugation" (Ferguson 82). For instance, she calls out the hypocrisy of Englishmen who claim that their birth rights are being taken away while their "cold hand[s] may at the very moment rivet their chains, by sanctioning the abominable traffick" (*Rights of Woman* 281) of slavery. Here, she makes a similar argument as her one against Burke in Rights of Men, but instead of leaving this as a stand-alone abolitionist argument, she almost immediately draws the reader's attention back to the subject of women's oppression saying, "let me return to the more specious slavery, which chains the very soul of woman, keeping her for ever under the bondage of ignorance" (*Rights of Woman* 281). While she does condemn the slave trade, here, she clearly prioritizes her feminist goals over her abolitionist ones. She names the oppression of women in her society as the more *specious* slavery, one that is attractive to men on the surface but causes suffering to men and women in reality. To Wollstonecraft, the practice of chattel slavery is visually abusive and horrific, but the oppression of women is clothed in a more palatable exterior. She uses the emotional capital of the slave trade and attempts to apply it to the condition of women. By representing the suffering of women in the physical, visceral terms of colonial slavery, she hopes to elicit a similar disgust towards the enslavement of women to that which is already felt towards the horrors of slavery by many of her fellow Britons. In a similar way to the abolitionist move of exposing the realities of the slave trade to garner sympathy for the movement, Wollstonecraft uses literal slavery to expose the horrors behind the seemingly benevolent subjugation of women.

In another example in which she uses abolitionist appeals as vessels for feminist ones, Wollstonecraft invokes the contemporary blood sugar debate. She writes, "is sugar always to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? Is this not indirectly to deny a woman reason? for a gift is a mockery, if it be unfit to use" (*Rights of Woman* 282). While she does bring her reader's attention to contemporary effects of the slave trade in her nod to the slave labor involved in the production of sugar, in her comparison of blood sugar towards sweet but uneducated and dependent women, she positions the oppression of women on an equal plane with the oppression of African slaves. She compares literal chains that bind the bodies of enslaved people and bar them from their agency with the chains of ignorance that bind women's minds and prevent them from living independent lives.

Not only does this example juxtapose the oppression of women with that of enslaved people, but these words are also a subliminal call-to-action for the women of Wollstonecraft's time. The blood sugar boycotts, as I discussed earlier, were one of the few political conversations that women had ready access to. Consequently, in mentioning the idea of blood sugar, she designs to catch the attention of her female readers. She takes the care and sensibility that women have been applying towards the unethical origins of sugar and tries to make these women feel their own oppression and join her. With another contextualized reference to slavery, Wollstonecraft tries to make what she sees as the invisible suffering of women visible through a well-known political frame of reference, playing on the visceral imagery behind the idea of blood sugar. The blood sugar boycotts act as an example of female political action for

Wollstonecraft, and she hopes to inspire a similar feminist movement through the allusion to this abolitionist one.

Wollstonecraft continues to describe the domination of women by men as so: "man sees himself as an empire and woman as his conquest; he wishes to keep a slave rather than a friend" (*Rights of Woman* 229). Here, with her mentions of slavery, empire, and conquest, Wollstonecraft purposely calls to mind the slavery perpetrated by British imperialism. Thus, she does not allow her reader to forget about the actual problem of slavery. Yet, she is not directly referring to slavery here, but instead she is applying the scenario of slavery in order to promote the idea that under a relationship that contains this imbalance of power, women are not free. She certainly views slavery in a negative light and thus her metaphors carry an abolitionist tone, but her true meaning of the word "slave" refers to a woman rather than a victim of physical slavery.

She is particularly concerned with the lack of liberty women have within the institution of marriage. She acknowledges the economic necessity for women to marry, but she warns against degrading "women by making her the slave of love" (*Rights of Woman* 215)[11]. When used to cement men as the only rational creatures in a relationship, she argues that physical love can be dangerous for women. She attacks Rousseau's assertions that girls, from an early age, should be taught to suppress their own desires so that they will not find it hard as adult women to submit to

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[11] Wollstonecraft also warns about the mastery over men that women's sexuality gives them and argues that with this power, women can easily become tyrants over men whom they are mistresses to. She acknowledges that "the very men who are the slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters" (*Rights of Woman* 132-133). In what is possibly a reference to contemporary slave rebellions she warns men that "history brings forward a fearful catalog of the crimes which their cunning has produced, when the weak slaves have had sufficient address to over-reach their masters" (*Rights of Woman* 309); through this image, she warns about the possibility of female uprisings should this oppression continue. In doing so, she highlights the negative effects that female subjugation has on the men who enforce it. This is a similar tactic to the abolitionist one of emphasizing the negative effects of slavery on slave owners as well as enslaved people.

the will of their future lovers. With "thus taught slavishly to submit to their parents, they are prepared for the slavery of marriage" (*Rights of Woman* 295), she again describes this imbalance of power in terms of slavery. Wollstonecraft condemns the British style of educating girls that insists upon keeping them ignorant for the sake of their innocence; children should be innocent, she admits, but women should not be treated like children.

This is one of her primary arguments: women should be educated in the same sense that men are so that they are able to use reason like men. As Mellor points out, she "frequently uses *slave* or *slavery* figuratively to underline her attack on female psychological dependencies" (Mellor 364). Marriage, though it has become a means of physical survival for many of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries, does not only limit women's mobility in terms of their physical bodies, but it primarily entraps their minds. Wollstonecraft sees the poor behavior of British women as a direct consequence of their lack of education and encouragement to be agreeable to their future (or current) husbands. In yet another instance of her affinity for using abolitionist language for feminist purposes, she asserts that if women "be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man" (*Rights of Woman* 146-147); men cannot both expect women to be independently reasonable and entirely dependent on their husbands or fathers.

Within this instance of the abstraction of slavery, it must be noted that Wollstonecraft inadvertently accuses enslaved people of a lack of rationality and, though she separates the two categories, connects the image of enslaved people with the image of animals, again proving the impossibility of using these metaphors without distracting readers from literal slavery, and often, accidentally feeding into racist tropes for the sake of a feminist argument. A similar problem arises when Wollstonecraft implicates women in their own mental slavery; she argues that "thus

degraded, her reason, her misty reason! is employed rather to burnish than to snap her chains" (*Rights of Woman* 227). Though this statement can be read as a call to action for women to free themselves from male oppression, it also implies that women are, at least partially, responsible for their own "enslavement". When paired with language about chattel slavery, this implication spreads to enslaved people as well. If women are slaves and are responsible for their enslavement, enslaved Africans are also implicated in their own captivity in this comparison. By blaming instances of mental slavery on the enslaved, Wollstonecraft, presumably accidentally, does the same for victims of physical slavery, by extension.

Additionally, within her argument for education through the comparison of women to enslaved people, not only does Wollstonecraft see slavery and the state of women as comparable, but she also sees the subjugation of women as the worse of the two forms of oppression because she sees the mental "slavery" of denying women education and reason as more harmful than physical slavery; "although she supports abolition unequivocally, she considers 'reason' an even more important attribute to possess than physical freedom" (Ferguson 86). By mentioning that the "slavery" of women is an attack upon their minds and their virtue, she positions women in a more critical condition than that of enslaved people. While the bodies of slaves are being stolen from them, Wollstonecraft argues that the very souls of women are jeopardized by their position in society and lack of education. It is this dichotomy of literally enslaved people as representative of physical slavery and undereducated women as representative of mental slavery that Wollstonecraft's arguments depend upon. While the same arguments could be made about the lack of education allowed to enslaved people in addition to their physical enslavement, Wollstonecraft instead devotes her focus only to the injustices suffered by women, clearly privileging her feminist goals.

In an attempt to qualify all of her comparisons, Wollstonecraft says, “when, therefore, I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense” (*Rights of Woman* 310). It is clear that Wollstonecraft is not literally equating women and wives to physically enslaved people, but she sees the similarities between the issues as lending themselves to comparison. Despite Wollstonecraft’s status as a vocal abolitionist, when she focuses on feminism, her focus on slavery as a literal phenomenon is neglected as even when she does acknowledge and condemn the slave trade, she nevertheless uses these images to stress the importance of feminism rather than abolitionism. Though as I have suggested, it is impossible to use slavery as a figurative image without distancing the argument from literal slavery, Wollstonecraft attempts to fight for both causes. It is this tradition of language, one that ties the plight of women directly to colonial slavery perpetrated by the British empire, that I see as a point of connection between *The Vindications*, *The Woman of Colour*, and *Emma*. Wollstonecraft is a primary forerunner of using images of particularly contemporary slavery to both raise awareness for the conditions of slavery and to use these conditions and their capital in contemporary political debate to promote women’s liberation.

CHAPTER 3

THE WOMAN OF COLOUR: MARRIAGE AND "SLAVERY IN ITS WORST FORM"

In the direct wake of the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, *The Woman of Colour: A Tale* (1808), an epistolary novel from the perspective of the biracial daughter of an English plantation owner in Jamaica and an African woman enslaved on his plantation, was published anonymously. The novel's Jamaican heroine, Olivia Fairfield, with her direct connections to plantation slavery, is placed within a British marriage plot similar to those in contemporary novels. Consequently, the novel shows the prejudices and struggles Olivia faces because of both her race and her gender. I position *The Woman of Colour* as a successor to Wollstonecraft's vindications because of the language Olivia employs which defines the oppression that women face within marriage in terms of chattel slavery. Like Wollstonecraft, the author of *The Woman of Colour* "drew on the racial imagery and the rhetoric around colonial slavery of the time" (Huang 168), using contemporary politics to figuratively describe other issues. In my argument, I explore how an avowedly abolitionist novel compares the struggles of women with the system of colonial slavery which it is fighting against. I ultimately find that *The Woman of Colour* fights for both abolitionism and feminism, but asserts the importance of feminism over abolitionism, largely due to this figurative abstraction of the slave trade.

There has been much speculation on the authorship of *The Woman of Colour* due to its anonymous publication. In his introduction to the 2008 Broadview edition of the text, Lyndon J. Dominique speculates that the author is, like Olivia, a woman who "had significant ties to the [British] colonies as well as in-depth knowledge of British society" (*Woman of Colour* 32), but is

not British herself, concluding that "it seems most plausible to propose that a woman of color wrote *The Woman of Colour"* (*WOC* 32). Other scholars are hesitant to make any claims that cannot be supported with more definitive evidence (Harol et al.). For the purposes of this thesis, it is not necessary or even possible to uncover the author behind the novel. However, because my argument takes into account the gender and race of the characters and authors who employ this comparison, it is important to note that I cannot fully explore the implications that the identity of *The Woman of Colour'*s author has on the abolitionist language co-opted for the purposes of feminism within the text.

Nevertheless, regardless of the author's identity, my point still stands; Olivia Fairfield is a non-white woman from a British colony using abolitionist terms in a similar way to the Wollstonecraftian tradition of describing wifehood, and British womanhood, as a form of slavery. Though Olivia's class position as a wealthy, educated heiress gives her the opportunity to make a similar comparison, to be sure, the message of her language of comparison diverges from that of British white women because of her status as a woman of color with direct ties to the atrocities of slavery. Whereas Wollstonecraft and Jane Fairfax, a character whom I will later discuss in my *Emma* section, are aware of the slave trade and make references to it as it is ingrained in their culture but are not directly involved in plantation slavery, Olivia has grown up on a plantation and has a personal connection to enslaved people as her mother was an enslaved African. Olivia's abstraction of the slave trade is more meaningful because of her relation to it. In her assertion that, "servitude, slavery, in its worst form, would be preferable… to finding [herself] the wife of a man by whom [she] was not beloved" (*WOC* 89), a passage which I will further analyze later, she compares her situation to that of an enslaved person in order to emphasize her powerlessness as a woman. Because of her connection to literal slavery, this

comparison holds more weight, but, in using her connection to slavery to abstract it, Olivia, perhaps unintentionally, decenters her fight for abolition in her attempt to represent the oppression she faces as a woman.

Olivia Fairfield, as the novel's heroine, is particularly important to my argument because, as the daughter of a British plantation owner in Jamaica and an enslaved woman and as a woman forced into a British marriage plot, she acts as the physical embodiment of the intersection of contemporary feminism and abolitionism that I have been discussing. At this pivotal time for the questioning of the rights of both women and enslaved people, Olivia is inseparable from both topics; her father's will forces her to enter a British marriage and thus give up her legal autonomy according to coverture laws while her situation within the society of British gentry is further complicated by her non-whiteness. Olivia is not enslaved in the system of chattel slavery herself, but she is descended from an enslaved African, and she considers the enslaved as her family saying, "though the jet has been faded to olive in my own complexion, yet I am not ashamed to acknowledge my affinity with the swarthiest negro that was ever brought from Guinea's coast" (*WOC* 53). Despite her obvious advantages over the enslaved people on her father's plantation, she continuously and avowedly places herself in the same category with them and expresses her physical kinship to enslaved Africans through her mother's heritage and her own complexion. With these frequent assertions of her relationship to enslaved people and arguments for their equality, Olivia demonstrates the abolitionist purpose of the text. While her marriage plot is often at the forefront of the novel, emphasizing the text's feminist sentiments, Olivia's many abolitionist insertions are also a central feature of the narrative, confirming the text's function as a work that vocally protests the injustices of slavery.

In addition to Olivia's identification with enslaved Africans and the history of her mother, the novel also represents Olivia's proximity to physical enslavement by posing Olivia in a similar state to an enslaved person at the beginning of the novel. When she arrives in England, she comes in through Bristol[12], a known hotspot for the slave trade[13]. The novel parallels Olivia's journey with that of an enslaved person, traveling between England and its colonies, using "metaphors and narrative tropes that evoke the slave trade– the middle passage, slave markets, and women's slave narratives– to comment on and critique England's slow progress toward abolition" (Matthew 357). Though Olivia's class status allows her to travel on this ship as a passenger, rather than a commodity, the beginning of the novel acts as Olivia's "middle passage" as it removes her from her colonial home and implants her in England where her fate will be decided for her by British subjects. Because Olivia is bound to travel to England specifically for this marriage, this staging of Olivia as a person in captivity acts as a literal formation of the comparison between female oppression and slavery. Olivia is bound from her native land to England where her autonomy will be subsumed by a white Englishman, a situation that clearly parallels the journeys of enslaved people from their homelands into colonial slavery.

In tandem with the novel's figurative posing of her as an enslaved person being transported to England, Olivia reinforces this idea with her use of the language of captivity to describe her situation. While on her journey to England, Olivia tells the Honeywoods, a mother and son who are also traveling to England from Jamaica that "from the moment I set my foot on your land of liberty, I yield up my independence" (WOC 66). Unlike those who interpreted the

[12] The association of Bristol with the slave trade will also come up in my segment on *Emma* .
[13] David Olusoga asserts that "The newspapers tell us that transactions for the sale of human beings were conducted not just from pubs but also in the thriving and fashionable coffeehouses, particularly in the key ports of Liverpool, Bristol, and London" (Olusoga 83)

Mansfield decision as marking England as a place where the institution of slavery could not be legally upheld, Olivia names England as the origin, rather than the emancipation, of her enslavement. She does not, however, question her status as a free person because of her race; as the free daughter of an English gentleman, she is secure in her class and does not fear literal enslavement when she arrives. This is a notably different experience than that of people like James Somerset, people who fled enslavement and lived in constant fear of being trafficked back to the colonies and re-enslaved. Nevertheless, Olivia uses language that is typically associated with abolitionism to describe her status as an economically dependent woman.

Olivia also expresses a sense of feeling commodified when she says, "as well might my *fortune* only have crossed the ocean, the *nominal* wife might have still remained in Jamaica" (*WOC* 90). She understands that she is being used as a vessel to funnel colonial wealth into England, a common phenomenon in marriages involving Caribbean women and English men according to Jennifer Reed[14]. Thus, when she refers to lack of independence, Olivia is doing so with her change in marital status in mind. In this moment and, as I argue, in the rest of the novel, Olivia's concerns as a woman overshadow her concerns as a person of color. Yet, despite her status as a member of the gentry in both Jamaica and England, the novel's staging does not allow Olivia to be separated from her proximity to enslaved Africans.

Though in these instances, Olivia does not make an overt metaphorical connection between marriage and slavery, her language suggests that she considers her upcoming marriage, which is ordered by her late father in order to attach her to a white British man and thus gain

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[14] Reed argues that "In these novels [including *The Woman of Colour*], Caribbean wealth is easily assimilated into English society, but the woman who provides a conduit to that wealth is contained outside of English domestic space. This exclusion of the Caribbean woman also excludes the stigma attached to the money's origin in chattel slavery" (Reed 509).

economic security, as a form of captivity in which she will not be afforded complete freedom. By making this comparison, Olivia draws attention away from the slavery of her mother and towards her own "slavery" of marriage. She talks of her passion for the abolitionist movement within her first letters, yet her marriage plot becomes the focal point of the narrative at its beginning. I am not suggesting that this marriage plot causes Olivia to be less of an abolitionist but rather that the novel's primary events are all connected to Olivia's marriage while realistic depictions of the slave trade are pushed to the margins of the narrative. While she fights for both women's rights and the rights of enslaved people, her feminist goals often take priority over her abolitionist ones.

Despite Olivia's constant acknowledgements of her Jamaican plantation, the prejudices she faces as the daughter of an enslaved African, and her deeply personal ties to enslaved people, the realities of slave trade are still decentered within the narrative. Kristina Huang asserts that "*The Woman of Colour* abstracts plantation slavery while positioning the protagonist Olivia Fairfield, a mixed-race heiress of a Jamaican plantation, as a figure of British imperial tutelage" (Huang 167). Though Olivia and Dido both often speak about the Fairfield plantation, the reader never actually experiences it, and when the two address their home, they speak of it in pleasant terms, circumventing the topic of its undeniable reliance on slave labor altogether. The novel, in fact, never depicts Olivia within her native Jamaica. When the novel begins, Olivia is on a ship enroute to England where the majority of the novel's events occur, and in her final letter to Mrs. Milbanke, the Jamaican recipient of all of Olivia's letters, discloses her return to Jamaica. Olivia does provide a rather unspecific depiction of the dynamics of her home in Jamaica, but it is never a realized setting in the narrative. Thus, Olivia's father's plantation is never fully accessible to the text's readers and neither is the full extent of the enslavement that takes place there.

This abstraction of slavery is further assisted by the novel's lack of actually enslaved individuals. In fact, Dido is the only actually enslaved character in the present of the narrative, and her actual status is somewhat ambiguous, at times being equated to a domestic servant. Dido denies her own slavery except in relation to Olivia and her father saying,"' but Mrs. Merton's maid treats me, as if me was her slave; and Dido was never a slave but to her dear own Missee, and she was proud of that'" (WOC 100). Dido seems to be under some obligation to work for Olivia, but she also genuinely loves her. Additionally, she does not accept the disrespect of Mrs. Merton's servants, whom she does not consider as her superiors, so she does not consider her position as one lower than domestic servitude. If Dido is a slave, which is most likely since she comes from a plantation, the novel works to portray her as a willing participant in her servitude towards Olivia so as not to endorse the slavery that it seeks to abolish. Dido plays the part of the grateful slave as long as Olivia is her benevolent mistress within this dynamic, perhaps miming an optimal example of a post-abolitionist relationship between a former slave and a former master. The nature of Dido's work, though the novel mentions it little, is also more aligned with that of a domestic servant or an enslaved person who works in a household; she is never depicted within the context of plantation slavery; she does not enact the grueling physical labor that abolitionists fought to educate the public about. Due to Dido's ambiguous status, her willingness to work, and the type of work she is depicted as doing, the novel does not attempt to utilize her as an example of the horrors of plantation slavery even though she is one of the only enslaved characters in *The Woman of Colour*.

Olivia's enslaved mother, Marcia, is mentioned a few times within the novel, but since she died from childbirth complications, she is distanced from not only the reader but from Olivia herself. For a novel that seeks to combat the horrors of slavery, *The Woman of Colour* relies little

on doing so through its depictions of examples of slavery. When I call attention to the novel's lack of depiction of slaves in present captivity, I do not mean to discount the importance of Marcia within the novel as she serves to exemplify the humanity of enslaved Africans and is a model for Olivia's morals as a Christian woman. Of her mother she writes, "I had a glorious example in my mother… my mother, though an African *slave*, when once she had felt the power of that holy religion which you preach, from *that* hour she relinquished him, who had been dearer to her than existence" (WOC 148). Olivia directly refutes the assumption that non-white people do not have the capability for morality as defined by Christianity. It is not Olivia's white Christian father who ends the extramarital affair with Olivia's mother, his slave, but it is Marcia, an enslaved African convert to Christianity who has denied the man she loves for the sake of her religious morality. Marcia is an important feature in and motivation for Olivia's abolitionist agenda, but the realities of her enslavement are translated through the words of her daughter who never met her. Thus, she is more of an ideal than a solidified character.

I agree with Huang's argument that places Olivia as a tutelage of British imperialism as Olivia is educated as a British woman. Although she is an abolitionist, her values are often Eurocentric; she upholds British culture, education, and religion as superior. But, I further assert that this abstraction, as a result of her ties to British imperial ideas, also privileges Olivia's identity as a woman within the British marriage market over her position as a person of color with intimate connections to the slave trade. Olivia, as both a non-white person and a woman, cannot inherit her father's fortune without her connection to a white man. She inherits the burden of a British marriage plot through her father's will that stipulates that she must marry her cousin, Augustus, to secure her inheritance. Olivia, though she is never considered white, through this marriage plot, inhabits a similar position to white heroines in contemporary novels. She, like

these white heroines, is forced to marry in order to gain economic stability and thus her agency is threatened.

Olivia, if she follows her father's demands, has access to financial stability and is entitled to her freedom by British and Jamaican law and is thus in a position adjacent to that of a British woman in the same situation. But, when she enters British society, she is also not looked upon as a fully white woman. Because her appearance denotes racial difference to those in her society, when she arrives in England, she is exoticized and discriminated against. While her agency is threatened by her father's will and her potential marriage in the same way that a typical white woman's agency would be in a marriage plot, her story is complicated by the racism she faces in both England and Jamaica as a person of color. Olivia's joint statuses as a person of color and as a woman in a marriage plot limit her independence in British society. That being said, Olivia seems to feel the impact of her status as a woman more than that of her status as a person of color, primarily because her class status allows her adjacency to the position of a white woman.

While Olivia alludes to her lack of agency in her more circuitous language on her journey to England, the most direct example of the abstraction of slavery to describe the female condition is when, in a conversation with her uncle and perspective father in law, Olivia states, "'servitude, slavery, in its worst form, would be preferable,' said I, 'to finding myself the wife of a man by whom I was not beloved'" (*WOC* 89). In this scene, Olivia has traveled to England to marry Augustus so that she can inherit her father's fortune. If Augustus refuses Olivia, her father's fortune and the responsibility of her care will go to George Merton, Augustus's brother, and his wife, a couple whom Olivia knows to be selfish and racist. Olivia has her potential state of dependence upon her hateful in-laws in mind when she mentions this "servitude," but given her extensive knowledge of and abhorrence for the slave trade, it is impossible to deny that she is

referring to chattel slavery, the very enslavement her mother underwent, when she mentions "slavery in its worst form." Here, Olivia clearly establishes a loveless marriage not only as equal to chattel slavery, but as worse than such. She, like Wollstonecraft, uses the language of slavery to describe her dire situation within the British marriage market. Though she is using this metaphor to emphasize her suffering as a woman in contemporary terms, this language in the words of someone intimately connected to the British slave trade, eclipses, though it does not completely eliminate, the novel's abolitionist purpose. To be sure, this novel explicitly fights for the rights of both enslaved people and women, yet because of Olivia's abstraction of slavery, it is not possible for the novel to treat both topics with equal importance.

Olivia, also within a Wollstonecraftian vein, positions intellectual slavery, that is the oppression of the mind, as more destructive than slavery of the body. Though the daughter of a victim of physical enslavement, Olivia is more concerned with educating enslaved people than freeing them. Her primary complaint with her father's plantation is not that enslaved people like her mother are kept there; she asserts that physically, the slaves on her father's plantation are well taken care of, positioning her father within the trope of the benevolent slave owner, yet she laments that "their minds were suffered to remain in the dormant state in which he found them" (*WOC* 55). The physical captivity of enslaved people, so long as they are treated what she considers to be fairly by their masters, does not bother Olivia as much as their lack of access to education, their mental enslavement. In a statement condemning racism, Olivia laments, "the distributions of Providence are equally bestowed, and that it is culture, not capacity which the negro wants" (WOC 55). This sentiment echoes the feminist argument Wollstonecraft makes when she says "where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same? All the difference that I can discern, arises from a superior advantage of liberty…" (*Rights of Woman*

131). The problem of slavery, according to Olivia, would be solved if education was accessible to all people; the true corruption of the slave trade does not lie in physical captivity but in the dampening of minds and souls.

In one of many attempts to embarrass Olivia, Mrs. Merton, her soon to be sister-in-law, asks her directly for her thoughts on abolition. Olivia responds, “the feelings of humanity, the principles of my religion, would lead me, as a Christian, I trust, to pray for the extermination of this disgraceful traffic, while *kindred* claims (for such I must term them) would likewise impel me to be anxious for the emancipation of my more immediate brethren" (WOC 81). Olivia not only publicly condemns the slave trade here, but she also implies the immorality of the slave trade based on Christian principals, suggesting that anyone who perpetrates the slave trade is acting immorally. Mrs. Merton then points out Olivia’s connection to the slave trade as the heiress to her father’s plantation. Olivia is outraged at Mrs. Merton’s insinuation of her father’s guilt, but through this interaction, the reader is reminded of the uncomfortable fact that Olivia’s wealth is a product of the slave trade.

The origin of Olivia’s wealth is not the only way that she is tied to imperialist forces. Olivia Carpenter argues that Olivia Fairfield sustains some of the same hierarchies that limit her own agency within her new society: “Unable to access whiteness herself, Olivia can still lay claim to the cultural practices and knowledge available to Man… her commitment to such a hierarchy allows her to lay claim to white femininity” (Carpenter 259). Despite her Jamaican identity, Olivia models an ideal of British womanhood. The novel constantly reinforces Olivia’s education, one that, though performed outside of England itself, is decidedly British; this fact is present even in the very recipient of Olivia’s letters, Mrs. Milbanke, her British governess. In this way, Olivia is literally what Huang correctly deems a product of imperial tutelage in the

sense that her colonial education is one defined by British guidelines. This point is also continually emphasized by the exceptional nature of Olivia's behavior within her newfound British circles. To add to Carpenter's argument, I assert that Olivia's comparison of wifehood to slavery is a function of her harnessing of white femininity. She is able to carry on the tradition of Wollstonecraft's comparative language because of her proximity to whiteness through her class status.

In fact, in many instances, Olivia is portrayed as displaying more *British* virtue and decorum than the English women she encounters. When the novel briefly shifts away from Olivia's point of view to that of her affianced Augustus, this distinction is particularly clear. Augustus writes that Olivia "is accomplished and elegant; but her accomplishments are not the superficial requirements of the day, – they are the result of application and genius in unison" (*WOC* 103). In order for the novel to increase the readers' sympathy for the abolitionist movement, Olivia has to not only exhibit a good character, she must be nothing short of exceptional. She, in fact, exceeds even the standard of her mother, who is portrayed as a woman of the highest moral standard despite her enslavement and after her conversion to Christianity, by promoting virtuous behavior from her very entrance into the novel. A large part of Olivia's function as a character who is meant to fight for abolition both within and outside of the page is her exceptional character. In order for the abolitionist message to stick, Olivia must become a tragic heroine, a woman who never wavers in her faith or morality even when she is effectively widowed and dependent on a meager allowance from her former in-laws. Olivia is meant to prove that not only can a woman of color be an equal to white, European women, she can also surpass them in intellect and decorum.

The author achieves Olivia's exceptional nature through her contrast to the novel's other English women. Mr. Honeywood, a man who befriends Olivia on her voyage to England at the beginning of the novel, says, "You will shame our English ladies" (WOC 65). Thus, before the reader meets any British women, apart from Honeywood's aged mother, Olivia is championed as a model English woman despite her West Indian background. She is constantly described in terms of the perfect Wollstonecraftian woman with the strength of her mind, the genuine nature of her faith, and her modest sexuality highlighted. In contrast to the silly, white English women she meets,[15] Olivia stands apart as one of the few rational women in the novel. This distinction is particularly evident through the comparison of Olivia with her sister-in-law, Mrs. Merton. She is Olivia's foil both in her physical appearance and her personality; Olivia describes her as fair, fat, and inactive which greatly diverges from her own darker skin tone and somewhat athletic physique, and she asserts that "[she] seem[s] hardly to consider her as a rational being" (*WOC* 73). The vicious and irrational woman represents Wollstonecraft's claim that "the grand source of female folly and vice has ever appeared to me to arise from narrowness of mind" (*Rights of Woman* 169); because Mrs. Merton has no reason, she has no virtue. On the other hand, Olivia is devoutly virtuous and rational, representing the inseparability of the two qualities. Mrs. Merton looks the part of an ideal British woman, but Olivia's reason far outweighs that of her conniving sister-in-law, making Olivia the model Englishwoman.

Though Olivia embodies European ideals in part to dispel the racist, pro-slavery myths of European superiority, because she upholds European standards, she sometimes positions herself

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[15] For arguments on Olivia's comparison of women from the East Indies see: Van Renen, Denys. "'The Temple of Folly': Transatlantic 'Nature', Nabobs, and Environmental Degradation in The Woman of Colour." *Romantic Sustainability: Endurance and the Natural World, 1780-1830*, edited by Ben P. Robertson, Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 147–68. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=mzh&AN=2016581532&site=eds-live.

above other people of color who have not had the same privilege of education. Olivia's own eurocentrism can also be seen in her interactions with her servant, of some sort, Dido. Dido, though her legal status is never made explicit, is a domestic servant at best and an enslaved woman at worst. As I mentioned earlier, Olivia verbally insists upon being associated with even the darkest of her enslaved kin, yet she and the novel both look at Dido with benevolent condescension. Olivia and Dido are always distinguished from each other in obvious ways such as Dido's dialect which Olivia terms "half-broken" (*WOC* 57) and skin color. As Carpenter points out, "Dido's body is always marked as inferior by a set of fixed, phenotypical traits" (Carpenter 248). Dido does not have Olivia's "faded" complexion or polished, educated language, and she certainly cannot inhabit the space of an ideal British woman. The class difference between the two women is also frequently exploited; Dido is always serving Olivia who "lays claim to the traits of a normative British heroine at the expense of Dido's freedom" (Carpenter 253) whether or not Dido perceives her own position that way. Though Olivia claims her equality with Dido in an attempt to combat her young nephew's racism towards Dido, Olivia and Dido are not treated as equals by the novel or any of its characters.

Despite these dynamics, Dido provides an important counter-perspective into the comparability of marriage with slavery. While maintaining that Oliva prioritizes her status as a woman over her status as a person of color, I also contend that the narrative provides more than one perspective on the comparison of marriage and slavery. As letters from her perspective dominate the narrative and as Olivia is constantly positioned as Dido's superior, Olivia's stance on this topic is privileged by the novel; however, through Dido's transcribed words and actions, *The Woman of Colour* provides an alternate understanding of marriage, one that does not define marriage as a form of enslavement for women. In fact, instead of denouncing marriage, Dido

clearly views marriage as a beneficial institution for women and Olivia in particular. From the beginning of the novel, Dido does not empathize with Olivia's anxieties about marriage. She is excited for Olivia's marriage to Augustus, considering Olivia as a princess who is betrothed to a great lord according to Olivia's opening letters. While Olivia discredits these sentiments, she later enjoys her marriage with Augustus, giving Dido's words some merit.

However, Olivia's marriage to Augustus does not last long due to the reappearance of Augustus's first wife whom he married in secret and whom he believed to be dead due to the tricks of his sister-in-law. After the bigamous nature of Olivia's marriage to Augustus is revealed and the marriage is dissolved, Olivia moves to a small cottage in Wales with Dido and is content to live off of a meager allowance from her former brother in law. Olivia is devastated by the loss of her marriage insisting that she "now and to the last moment of [her] existence, shall consider [herself] the widowed wife of Augustus Merton" (*WOC* 165) despite the comparative poverty that she will face because of this stance. However, Olivia's Welsh lodging happens to be in the neighborhood of Mr. Honeywood, the man whom Olivia befriends on her initial journey to England. Earlier in the novel, Honeywood showed unmistakable signs of being enamored with Olivia which were necessarily rejected because of her prior engagement to her cousin. Before Olivia is aware of Honeywood's proximity to herself, Dido is in communication with him and arranges a visit from him, assuming that this meeting will result in an engagement between Honeywood and Olivia. Honeywood does propose to Olivia, but she immediately rejects him.

This matchmaking attempt by Dido illustrates her understanding that a marriage to Honeywood would put Olivia in an improved situation; she will escape the financial custody of her cruel cousins, and secure herself a devoted husband. Dido, as an enslaved person, clearly does not view marriage as a form of slavery much less as worse than physical enslavement. As

she assumes Olivia's acceptance of his proposal, Dido situates Honeywood as her master, calling him "Massa Honeywood" (*WOC* 166), giving him the title which she previously reserved for Olivia's father. She names Honeywood as the man of Olivia's household because she does not see a reason why Olivia would deny a marriage proposal from a wealthy, kind man who loves her. When Olivia asserts her resolution not to marry, Dido is devastated saying, "me know nothing in this England town, but disappointments" (*WOC* 167). Her reaction to this failure to redeem the marriage plot exhibits her view that marriage is an avenue for women to gain financial security. Olivia does not take this positive perception of marriage seriously; in further instances of her condescending to Dido, she calls her "my faithful yet, mistaken girl" (WOC 160) and "poor, affectionate, and simple-hearted girl" (WOC 168), treating Dido's assumptions as silly and childish. Yet, while Olivia dismisses Dido's marriage plot as ridiculous, it is not illogical. Olivia's acceptance of this proposal would fit seamlessly into a contemporary British novel. Through this possible reconciliation of the marriage plot, the narrative veers from its reader's expectations, encouraging a questioning of Olivia's perspective. This questioning, however, is short lived as Olivia vehemently refuses to marry again and is eventually reinstated of her property without this marriage that Dido favors. Ultimately, despite this glimpse into a worldview that privileges abolitionism over feminism, the novel's positioning of Dido as inferior to Olivia invalidates her opinions on marriage. With Olivia's voice as the predominant narrator of the novel, Dido's opinions are positioned as inaccurate and as of secondary importance.

This point is reinforced by the fact that Olivia is not the only character to see marriage as an oppressive force. Honeywood tells Olivia, "you are free, you are unfettered" (*WOC* 164), defining Olivia's former marriage, like she does herself at the beginning of the novel, in terms of captivity. Though he sees marriage as a restrictive force only because it prevented him from

making an advance towards Olivia earlier and thus he does not use this comparison in the same context as Wollstonecraft and Olivia, he nevertheless acknowledges the oppression of female agency by marriage. The word “unfettered” signals the imagery of chains and manacles, images that are enmeshed within descriptions of the slave trade. Like Olivia when she discusses England as the land of her captivity at the beginning of the novel, Honeywood makes a comparison of marriage to the slave trade. In his proposal, it is clear that his reason for proposing to Olivia is her freedom from marriage; ironically, this freedom is also the very reason why Olivia is resolved not to marry again. By inhabiting widowhood, Olivia frees herself of all marriage-related bonds. In her eyes, marrying Honeywood would be yet another form of captivity for her to endure. She does not love Honeywood, so, in her own words, a marriage with him would be worse than servitude in its worst form.

The novel privileges this idea that marriage is a form of slavery as it denies Olivia a completed marriage plot while allowing her to be independently wealthy and at liberty to do as she pleases. When Olivia’s fortune is eventually reinstated at the end of the novel without the burden of marital responsibility, she decides to go back to her Jamaican plantation. “Freedom from marriage and the return of her inheritance offers this woman of colour the opportunity to participate in efforts to abolish slavery as well as participate in social advocacy for slaves and free people of colour in Jamaica" (Dominique “They Came” 259) as Olivia seeks to employ her abolitionist politics on her own plantation. She does not choose, however, to completely abolish the plantation with her new-found wealth and liberty, but she writes in her final letter, “I shall again zealously engage myself in ameliorating the situation, in instructing the minds-in mending the morals of our poor blacks" (*WOC* 188). Though, as Carpenter suggests, given the tumultuous state of plantocratic Jamaican politics and the delicate nature of Olivia’s status in Jamaican

planter society, she would not have had the power to physically free every person on her father's plantation[16], it does not seem like she even considers it. Instead, she is content with fixing her father's wrongs in the sense that she will become a truly "benevolent" slave owner by offering intellectual freedom through education as well as the kind treatment she asserts that her father showed his slaves. Within this model of plantation reformation, Olivia sponsors "a congruent paradox of anti-slavery sentiment married to dreams of a stable, happy plantation" (Carpenter 255), and again, Olivia proves to be Wollstonecraftian in her belief that the intellectual freedom of the enslaved people on her father's plantation is more important than their physical autonomy.

It is not just Olivia, but the novel as a whole, that privileges feminism over abolitionism as by the end of the novel, Olivia is free from the oppression of marriage, but the enslaved people on her father's plantation are not free from their physical bonds. In its very denial of a marriage plot, it frees Olivia from the "slavery" of her marriage and gives her economic power without her attachment to a man. Additionally, as Huang explains, "Because *The Woman of Colour* does not end with matrimony, readers are invited to consider how amelioration frames the narrative" (Huang 177). Olivia's failed marriage plot becomes her opportunity to enact her abolitionist politics in a plantation setting since she no longer has to struggle for agency as a married woman.

Because of Olivia's employment of Wollstonecraft's schematic with its inherent weakening of abolitionist message and her favoring of amelioration over abolition, as critics such as Olivia Carpenter have mentioned, Olivia Fairfield is disappointing to a modern audience. Olivia does not fulfil the role of a woman of color main character who wholeheartedly

[16] Carpenter notes that Olivia's "actions maintain a deep commitment to the most progressive politics available to her at the time, in all their nuances and limitations" (Carpenter 256).

champions the abolition of not only the slave trade, but also of slavery as a whole. Yet, the revolutionary nature of this novel and its fight for the abolition of the slave trade should not be diminished. Even Olivia's amelioration tactic "is a remarkably progressive political position for a rich black lady to be associated with in British literature" ("They Came" 259), as Dominique reminds modern readers. Even in an openly abolitionist text, because of its equating of the captivity of slavery with the situation of women, the overshadowing of the abolitionist message is impossible to avoid. Although my argument examines the complicated nature of using abolitionist language for the sake of feminism, it does not invalidate the importance of revolutionary abolitionist works like *The Woman of Colour* or deny their abolitionist intentions. Despite its prioritization of its feminist message, *The Woman of Colour* is also a fervently abolitionist work; much like Wollstonecraft's vindications, it simultaneously advocates for women and protests the slave trade.

CHAPTER 4

EMMA: THE SALE OF HUMAN FLESH *AND* INTELLECT

Like Wollstonecraft and the author of *The Woman of Colour*, Jane Austen criticizes the situation of women in her society through the use of the language of enslavement in *Emma* (1815). Austen's comparison of marriage to slavery is, however, implicit as it is inseparable from the passage in which Jane Fairfax, a single young woman on the verge of becoming a governess out of financial necessity, describes the governess trade, and by extension marriage, as "not quite [the sale] of human flesh" (Austen 207). While *Emma* cannot be considered an abolitionist work like *The Woman of Colour* because it does not explicitly call for the abolition of slavery*,* I assert that the text complicates this metaphor, suggesting that the two situations, though connected and comparable in the eyes of women in Austen's and her novel's societies, are not equivalent. Thus, the text itself does not completely discount an abolitionist reading, one that places the suffering of enslaved Africans as an evil far worse than that of the institution of marriage towards women. In my evaluation of the text, I intend to analyze the passage in which the metaphor takes place, demonstrate the text's connection between the governess trade and the marriage market, and discuss the novel's peripheral references to the historical reality of the slave trade. In doing so, I hope to show the novel's skepticism towards the comparative language of slavery and marriage even in a text that primarily grapples with the lack of female agency in this society.

Claudia Johnson remarks on Austen's ability "to use politically charged material in an exploratory and interrogative, rather than hortatory and prescriptive, manner "(Johnson xxi). Austen, by introducing political topics in indirect and nuanced ways, is able to think politically

without assigning a surface-level political message to her novels. In *Emma*'s case, Austen is able to draw attention to the abolitionist movement of her time in a novel that is guided by conventional marriage plots. In my use of Johnson's framework towards a reading of *Emma*, I do not assert that the primary import of *Emma* is to promote an abolitionist message. I do, however, argue that in writing Jane Fairfax's comment on the slave trade, which she (Fairfax), at least outwardly, condemns, Austen encourages a questioning of the morality of the slave trade. Additionally, I argue that Austen includes peripheral references to the slave trade that also contribute to this goal. G. White, in her reading of *Emma* in a fully abolitionist light, follows this same logic. White insists that "Jane Austen sought to undermine the views of those still supporting the status quo of chattel slavery" (White 72) through Jane Fairfax's words. While I take a more conservative approach on the subject and am wary of unequivocally labeling Austen as an abolitionist, I agree with White. Austen does deliberately bring up the slave trade through the words and backgrounds of her characters, and she does so while condemning the morality of the slave trade. As I will discuss further, Jane Fairfax outwardly condemns the "national sin" of the slave trade despite her minimizing comparison, and Austen mocks Mr. and Mrs. Elton, the characters who have implied connections to the trade. These examples show that Austen, in her asides, does not place the slave trade in a positive light, but they are also not substantial enough to constitute a text that champions abolitionism as one of its primary goals.

The main passage on which my argument hinges consists of a conversation between Jane Fairfax and Mrs. Elton, the newlywed bride of the town vicar. In this scene, the reasonable and accomplished Jane is trying to politely stave off Mrs. Elton's persistent offers to find her a governess position because she is secretly engaged to the soon-to-be wealthy Frank Churchill at the time this conversation takes place. Consequently, Jane has hopes for financial security in the

indefinite future. Her engagement is volatile though, so while Jane does not feel the need to search for jobs as a governess now, she will have to in the near future if said engagement is disrupted or even delayed. For Jane, an orphan who is in the care of relatively poor family members, financial security can come from either marriage or some sort of occupation, governessing being considered one of the most acceptable occupation for young women of her class status at the time[17]. It is within this precarious context that Jane Fairfax employs the abstraction of slavery in her conversation with Mrs. Elton:

> "There are places in town, offices, where enquiry would soon produce something– Offices for the sale– not quite of human flesh– but of human intellect." "Oh! My dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave trade, I assure you Mr. Suckling was always rather a friend to the abolition." "I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave trade," replied Jane; "governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies." (Austen 207)

Though Jane Fairfax claims that governess work, an occupation that is intricately tied to the idea of marriage in the novel, is "not quite" the sale of human flesh, by invoking this language of chattel slavery and questioning which subject endures more suffering, she likens the two situations, employing a similar schema to Wollstonecraft and Olivia Fairfield.

In order to properly evaluate the implications of Jane Fairfax's argument, it is important to connect the contemporary perception of governessing with that of marriage. *Emma* positions

[17] Although, no occupation is ideal for a woman of this class. Of governessing, Wollstonecraft states, "The few employments open to women, so far from being liberal, are menial; and when a superior education enables them to take charge of the education of children as governesses, they are not treated like the tutors of sons…But as women educated like gentlewomen, are never designed for the humiliating situation which necessity sometimes forces them to fill; these situations are considered in the light of a degradation" (*Rights of Woman* 287)

marriage and governessing as related subjects, as they are two primary means of financial security for women in Austen's world. Emma is famously able to declare that she will never marry, but that is only because she is extraordinarily wealthy and in a unique position as the acting head of her household. The less fortunate women of Highbury, such as Jane Fairfax, primarily rely on marriage as a source of economic stability. If non-wealthy women are unable or unwilling to marry and are not content to live in relative poverty like the novel's example Miss Bates, an aged single woman whose economic resources will depreciate throughout her life, their only other option is to make money through an occupation. The most readily available and socially acceptable occupation for young women of this class is securing a position as a governess, educating and overseeing the children of an upper-class family. In *Emma*'s society, marriage is the most preferable of the two options although, as I will later concede, Austen does not present an altogether optimistic view of marriage for women. Both marriage and governessing, as forms of economic mobility, involve women giving up their independence to some degree.[18]

Consequently, when Jane Fairfax decries the governess trade, she is additionally lamenting the possibility of an unsuccessful marriage plot between her and Frank Churchill. Because Jane is forced to even consider becoming a governess because of her unstable economic condition and particularly unstable marriage prospects, Jane's comments apply both to her thoughts on the governess trade and her thoughts on marriage. Wollstonecraft decries the same lack of options for women in her society: "...men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties" (*Rights of Women* 176). In light of the

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[18] Wollstonecraft affirms this to the extent of deeming marriage legal prostitution: "To this object [marrying advantageously] their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted" (Rights *of Women* 176)

correlation between marriage and governessing present in Jane Fairfax's predicament, Austen is extending this likening of the slave and governess trades to a likening of the slave trade to the position of women within England's marriage market.

While the phrase "the sale of human flesh" is an obvious reference to the slave trade, obvious enough, in fact, for even the typically unobservant and self-absorbed Mrs. Elton to pick up on, this wording can also be connected to the passage's relevance to the subject of marriage. White connects Fairfax's points about human flesh to the suggestion of the phrase 'one flesh' which alludes to the marriage ceremony that is printed in the *Book of Common Prayer* which would have been well known to Austen's contemporary audience. She posits that Jane's comparison is more about her refusal to marry for money alone, "The sale of human intellect would be 'not quite' as bad as the sale of human flesh. To marry for money… is therefore not a course of action Jane Fairfax is prepared to countenance" (White 58). With this logic, White argues that this whole conversation is a subversive one about marriage hidden within the surface-level argument about the governess trade.

Because Mrs. Weston, Emma's former governess, is within ear shot during this conversation, White concludes that "out of consideration to Emma and to her former governess there could be no question of Jane Fairfax making a comparison between the slave trade and being a governess, but because Mrs. Elton has made the comparison, Jane Fairfax neatly turns the reference into a criticism of anyone's regarding people as commodities" (White 69). I agree with White that Fairfax does have marriage in mind during her comparisons, but I do not think that the conversation can be disconnected from its language of comparison to the slave trade entirely. In Fairfax's very description of "the sale of human flesh", whether she is speaking of marriage, governessing, or both, it is doubtful that this comment was not meant, by either Austen

or Fairfax, to signal the slave trade, given the political state of Britain at the time of *Emma*'s publication in 1815, less than a decade after the British slave trade was abolished and more than a decade before British slavery itself was abolished in 1833. Furthermore, as I have shown with my analysis on Wollstonecraft's *Vindications* and *The Woman of Colour*, the use of the image of slavery to describe British women's lack of agency was already an established tradition well before *Emma* was published, so it is not unreasonable to assume that Jane Fairfax places herself within this tradition in her statements to Mrs. Elton.

While Jane Fairfax claims abolitionist sympathies in her condemnation of those who facilitate the slave trade by her focus on their guilt, she hinders this purportedly anti-slavery message by attempting to quantify suffering and questioning whether or not governesses or enslaved people suffer more. This argument is reminiscent of Wollstonecraft's insistence that mental enslavement harms individuals more than physical enslavement, that reason is a more essential human right than bodily autonomy. It also follows a similar logic to Olivia Fairfield's determination to ameliorate the situation of the enslaved people of her father's plantation through education rather than facilitating a physical emancipation of the plantation. In her conflation of the oppression of women and the enslavement of African subjects, Fairfax's argument considers only the physical slavery of enslaved Africans rather than the combination of both mental and physical slavery that enslaved Africans endured. She views the slave trade as the sale of human flesh, but she does not consider that it is simultaneously the sale of human intellect. This further exhibits the abstract nature of *Emma*'s references to the slave trade as Fairfax's depiction of slavery is based on a superficial understanding of slavery without considering the full extent of enslaved people's experiences. While *The Woman of Colour* frequently acknowledges the treatment of enslaved people, slavery is a fleeting topic within *Emma*. Within her centering of

white female suffering over that of the suffering of enslaved peoples, Jane Fairfax decenters the realities of the slave trade and thus largely invalidates the abolitionist opinions she may hold for the sake of emphasizing her points on female oppression. Yet, despite Jane Fairfax's weakening of her abolitionist argument with this comparison, she still definitively assigns guilt to perpetrators of the slave trade; through this detail, Austen presents the evil of the slave trade as an obvious fact.

The other way Austen shows her distaste for the slave trade is through her association of the ridiculous couple, the Eltons, with the slave trade. Austen ties Mrs. Elton, nee Augusta Hawkins, Jane Fairfax's partner in this discussion, to the slave trade before she even enters Highburry.[19] The name Elton is linked to slavery before Augusta's arrival. Thus, Austen primes her reader's mind to wander to the slave trade even before it is directly mentioned. Catherine Ingrassia points out that the very name of Hawkins would call Austen's contemporaries' attention to the slave trade as John Hawkins was considered to be the founder of British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade[20]. Furthermore, when Augusta is introduced as the wife of Mr. Elton, she is described as having an "independent fortune" (Austen 126); the novel reports that "she brought no name, no blood, no alliance. Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol– merchant, of course, he must be called" (Austen 127). Here, Austen not only leaves the exact product of Augusta's father's trade purposefully ambiguous, but she also connects the family to Bristol, which as I discussed in my section on *The Woman of Colour*,

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[19] Augusta's future husband, Mr. Elton, abstracts slavery before Augusta is introduced. When Mr. Elton is attempting to court Emma, he writes a charade that says, "Man's boasted power and freedom, all are flown/ Lord of the earth and sea, he bends a slave;/ and woman, lovely woman reigns alone" (Austen 53). Here, Mr. Elton inverts the metaphor of slavery to talk about the power women hold over men rather than the reverse. I read this as another priming of the reader for Augusta's connection to the slave trade.

[20] "The surname Hawkins, which appears nineteen times in the text, is one Augusta shares with Sir John Hawkins (1532–1595), the first English slave trader" (Ingrassia 102). Ingrassia also elaborates that Thomas Clarkson, an author of whose works Austen was familiar, mentioned John Hawkins.

was a known hotspot for the slave trade[21]. Austen's punctuation of the passage also demands a closer reading; the dash in front of the word *merchant* indicates the narrator's pause to find a respectable word to describe Mr. Hawkins. Likewise, with the phrase "of course, he must be called," the narrator suggests that though he must be called one, he is not quite a merchant. Austen's narrator intentionally circumvents a direct definition of Hawkins's trade, suggesting that Hawkins is not involved in a reputable business. If Hawkins conducts his business in Bristol and is a quasi-merchant of a dubious trade, as the passage suggests, he may well be a slave trader.

Ingrassia further validates these claims with evidence of Austen's reading of the works of the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson[22] which feature condemnation of both Sir John Hawkins and Bristol for their contributions to the slave trade. This suggests that *Emma*'s references to slavery are not merely products of Austen's imperial world, according to a Saidian reading of the text, but also deliberate asides. Moreover, the novel's narrator then goes on to make assumptions about the nature of the Hawkins' business noting, "as the whole of the profits of his [Augusta's father's] mercantile life appeared so very moderate, it was not unfair to guess the dignity of his line of trade had been very moderate also" (Austen 127). The narrator never directly mentions

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[21] "Austen codes Hawkins's involvement with colonial slavery and capitalizes on a complicated cultural perception of Bristol, a city Austen would have known through her visits there, her reading of Bristol newspapers, and, most powerfully, Clarkson's detailed presentation of Bristol in *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Austen's references to Bristol particularly as well as enslavement generally are keener, more specific, and more pointed than has been previously acknowledged and, accordingly, deepen the characterization of Mrs. Elton" (Ingrassia 98-99)

[22] "Austen also had a deep engagement with texts by abolitionist authors. In addition to the poetry of William Cowper (on 25 November 1798 Austen notes "the purchase of Cowper's works" and mentions listening when his work was read aloud), Austen also writes that she was "much in love . . . with Clarkson," a reference to abolitionist Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) and his 1808 *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (24 January 1813). That text provided a detailed account of the material reality of enslavement in terms of both the colonial enslaved and the domestic workers who enabled the enterprise. Clarkson's writings, particularly about Bristol, deeply inform the details of Mrs. Elton's life" (Ingrassia 98).

the slave trade in relation to Miss Augusta Hawkins, but when the details of her wealth are compiled together, the novel strongly hints that the Hawkins fortune is of questionable origin, if not generated from the slave trade itself.

Playing on the hints she has already dropped about Mrs. Elton's familial ties to the slave trade, Austen exhibits Augusta's defensiveness about these ties within this discussion with Jane Fairfax. While Jane is outwardly speaking of the governess trade, Mrs. Elton jumps to her brother-in-law, Mr. Suckling's defense immediately when Jane brings up the sale of human flesh. As White discusses, Mrs. Elton does not perceive the possible connection between the phrases "human flesh" and "one flesh" in her assumption of Jane's implication of the slave trade, so she misses the connection Jane is making between marriage and slavery. Because she does not understand Jane's comments as a commentary on marriage, she assumes Jane is talking about the literal slave trade. In her own words, Mrs. Elton is "shocked" out of her badgering of Jane to take up a governess position with one of her friends and into immediately denying her family's involvement with the slave trade although no one has even insinuated this involvement. Here, Austen pokes fun at the ridiculousness of Mrs. Elton while again suggesting that there is some truth to the claim that Augusta is so quick to deny. There is also something to be said about the fact that even the shameless Mrs. Elton is not avowedly pro slavery. In short, it is no coincidence that this conversation about the slave trade includes Mrs. Elton. Austen purposefully draws her readers attentions to the slave trade and imbues the text with a subtle abolitionist tone.

Thus far, I have discussed Austen's negative depiction of the slave trade through Jane Fairfax's condemnation of those who partake in it and through her mocking of the Eltons. In addition to these points, I argue that *Emma* establishes an abolitionist tone by disrupting Jane Fairfax's view of the governess "trade" and subsequently marriage as one of the worst forms of

slavery in its depiction of female characters who embody Jane's feared outcomes. Whereas Jane Fairfax says that she does not know whether enslaved people or entrapped women suffer more, Austen proves the incomparability of the two positions with female characters that inhabit all of the forms of captivity that Jane Fairfax is referring to in her comparison. Even amid her criticism of the lack of female agency in her society, Austen provides examples of women in successful marriages, fulfilled governesses, and even relatively well-off old maids. The lives of none of these women can be said to be even remotely comparable to physical enslavement, questioning the accuracy of Jane Fairfax's comparison. When arguing against the objectification of women within marriage, Wollstonecraft asks, "Is not the following portrait [of a wife] – the portrait of a house slave" (*Rights of Women* 220). Through her subtle disruption of Jane Fairfax's comparison, Austen also disrupts Wollstonecraft's equivalence.

Many scholars including Johnson have discussed *Emma*'s feminist criticism of marriage.[23] From the beginning of the novel, the negative effects of marriage, particularly on women, are highlighted. According to Mr. Woodhouse, "matrimony, as the origin of change, was always disagreeable" (Austen 7), and this change, the novel proves, primarily disrupts women. Marriage, for women, although it ideally brings financial security, usually means transplantation from one's family and social circle. Miss Taylor's marriage to Mr. Weston removes her from her residence with the Woodhouses, Harriet Smith's possible marriage to Robert Martin threatens to separate her from Emma, and even Mrs. Elton who revels in the power marriage affords her, laments the fact that her marriage distances her from her beloved Maple Grove.

[23] See Johnson's "Emma: Woman, Lovely Woman, Reigns Alone" in *Jane Austen, Women, Politics, and the Novel*.

Though the novel does not hold an overwhelmingly positive view of marriage considering its many indications of marriage as a disruptive force, especially for women, the novel begins and ends with several successful marriage plots. *Emma* has clear intentions to discuss the plights of women[24], particularly married women, but even so, it has a complex relationship to the type of comparison that Wollstonecraft sets the standard for. Instead of reinforcing Jane Fairfax's sub-textual comparison between slavery and marriage through her literal argument comparing governessing and slavery, I argue that Austen challenges this metaphor through its depictions of marriages and governesses. Austen is able to champion the importance of agency and criticize forces that limit this while still including positive examples of marriages and governessing.

Despite Austen's focus on the burdensome necessity of matrimony for women and the pain that accompanies marriage once it occurs, she does not assert this position as the most precarious form of captivity. In fact, the novel explicitly points to ways in which women still have a certain amount of control within a marriage, primarily through their ability to choose a husband. Emma tells Mr. Knightley that "a woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked..." (Austen 40), and this adage is reinforced by the failed proposals in the novel due to a woman's rejection. Emma rejects Mr. Elton's intoxicated advances, Emma convinces Harriet Smith to reject Robert Martin, and Jane Fairfax briefly ends her secret engagement to Frank Churchill when the probability of their marriage seems unlikely. There are many pressures that induce women to marry, but even so, women are still allowed the powers of choice and refusal.

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[24] For an argument on how Emma uses dances to assert a sort of masculinity, see MALONE, MEAGHAN. "Jane Austen's Balls: Emma's Dance of Masculinity." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 70, no. 4, Mar. 2016, pp. 427–47. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.26377130&site=eds-live. For a brief postcolonial feminist perspective of Emma, see Kuwahara, Kuldip Kaur. "Jane Austen's Emma and Empire: A Postcolonial View." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004.

In Emma's case, she has even more agency as her marriage to Mr. Knightley allows her to marry for love without removing her from her home and without disrupting her circle of influence.[25]

Immediately after the novel's brief introduction to Emma, it emphasizes the type of relationship Miss Taylor and Emma shared as a governess and her pupil for the sixteen years they had lived together before Mrs. Weston's marriage. Though a governess, Miss Taylor "had fallen little short of a mother in affection" (Austen 5) to Emma and the two "had been living together as friend and friend" (Austen 5); *Emma* uses familial and platonic terms to describe this governess instead of terms that imply labor or occupation. Miss Taylor's life as Emma's governess is not depicted as a captive one. She becomes an honorary part of the Woodhouse family and eventually is removed from her governess position by her marriage to Mr. Weston.

Austen also provides an example of an unmarried woman's available agency through her example of Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax's aunt. Though Mr. Knightley discusses her steady decline in wealth due to her decision never to marry, Miss Bates is not in a terrible position. The narrator says that she "enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married. Miss Bates stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favor "(Austen 16). Miss Bates has the respect and assistance of her neighbors despite her lack of wealth, youth, and beauty. The novel also insists upon Miss Bates's contentment with her lot asserting, "she was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good will" (Austen 16). The threat of becoming an old maid with no financial security looms over most of Austen's female characters, including Jane Fairfax, yet though Miss Bates is not a wealthy woman by any means, Austen shows that she lives a good life in which her needs

[25] For an argument about how Emma's marriage defies traditional roles, see Seeber, Barbara K. "Loneliness and the Affective Imperative of the Marriage Plot in Jane Austen's Emma." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2020, pp. 233–45. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=mzh&AN=202019746891&site=eds-live.

are met. Even this position, which Jane Fairfax desperately hopes to avoid, does not entail the suffering that comes with physical captivity.

Jane is saved from her impending employment as a governess by her marriage to Frank Churchill, but even if she was not, the novel certainly does not view this option as a fate worse than chattel slavery. If Jane had become a governess, she could have ended up in a situation like that of Mrs. Weston who has a wonderful relationship with the Woodhouses and is eventually able to marry for love and gain economic security. Even if Jane chose to not marry or become a governess, the example of her maiden aunt, Miss Bates, proves that she would most likely have her basic needs met. None of the possible outcomes for Jane Fairfax even remotely compare to the position of a victim of chattel slavery. While these examples do not make up a definitive abolitionist argument in and of themselves, they do point out the inaccuracy of Jane Fairfax's questioning of who suffers more.

While Austen brings attention to the slave trade through the details of Mrs. Elton's family fortune and Jane Fairfax's comparison of the suffering of governesses and enslaved people, Jane Fairfax employs the same language used by Wollstonecraft and Olivia Fairfield, prioritizing her argument for female autonomy over her assertion of slave traders' guilt and suggesting the comparability of the suffering of enslaved people and governesses and wives. Austen, however, disrupts Jane Fairfax's arguments through her depiction of women in the same forms of "captivity" that Fairfax compares to physical enslavement. I read this as Austen's subtle questioning of the validity of Wollstonecraft's mode of comparison.

My reading of these works together provides an examination of the continuation of the literary tradition of British women abstracting abolitionist terms for feminist purposes, using the highly visible and established imagery of chattel slavery to highlight the more "specious"

oppression that women faced in the long eighteenth century. Wollstonecraft establishes a precedent for abstracting slavery in the colonial context to describe women's struggles, and I read *The Woman of Colour* and *Emma* as speaking to Wollstonecraft's ideas, if not to the vindications themselves. Wollstonecraft and Olivia Fairfield view intellectual slavery, that is, the lack of education and subsequent denial of reason, as even worse than physical enslavement. Wollstonecraft's political essays wholeheartedly support this opinion, and though *The Woman of Colour* does offer a possibility for a disruption of this dynamic through Dido's viewpoints on marriage, it ultimately upholds Wollstonecraft's analogy as well. While Austen acknowledges the oppression that the "sale of human intellect" enforces, particularly through the character of Jane Fairfax, because the novel shows successful examples of both wives and governesses, *Emma*'s logic suggests that Wollstonecraft's comparison is exaggerated and inaccurate. Though Austen offers a disruption of this comparison in a way that the vindications and *The Woman of Colour* do not, this disruption is limited as it is primarily implicit within the text. Both Wollstonecraft and *The Woman of Colour* directly address the abolitionist movement in a way that *Emma* does not.

Through my examination of these texts, I do not discount the possibility for authors to support both abolitionism and feminism simultaneously as I believe all of the authors I have discussed do this to some extent. Wollstonecraft, the author of *The Woman of Colour*, and Austen, critique slavery to varying degrees in their work, but in their attempts to legitimize the struggles of British women through employing the emotional capital of contemporary examples of British colonial slavery, they unavoidably shift their abolitionist arguments to the background of their works in favor of their feminist messages. By abstracting chattel slavery as a tool for

their feminist arguments, they distance their readers from the materiality of colonial slavery and strengthen their feminist arguments at the expense of their abolitionist ones.

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