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Tentative Title: In Pursuit of Self-Governance and Human Virtue: Reason and Sensibility in Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft

Prospectus

I am completing an honors thesis this semester (Fall 2015) focused on the role of reason and sensibility in feminist literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I am focusing on Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* and Mary Wollstonecraft's treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as my primary texts. Austen is an eminent author in contemporary culture, and is commonly associated with proper ladies with excellent manners. The politics of *Sense and Sensibility* in particular, alongside other Austen works, have fascinated critics in recent years. Since the 1975 publication of Marilyn Butler's seminal work *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, which characterizes Austen as a committed conservative, critics have since challenged and debated Austen's politics. This discussion is ongoing, with Peter Knox-Shaw more recently contributing to the conversation and providing a rebuttal of Butler's argument. Additionally, Claudia Johnson and Margaret Kirkham have considered how Austen draws on radical women's writing of the 1790s. However, none of these authors have considered how Austen's work draws on radical women's writing of the 1790s, specifically Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, with reason and sensibility at the center of this argument.

I argue that both Wollstonecraft and Austen provide a similar critique of sensibility. Wollstonecraft's treatise is often regarded as a pioneering, radical feminist work that criticizes the education that women receive which only cultivates their sensibilities without attending to reason. I contend that Wollstonecraft's critique of sensibility, focused on female education, crafts an appeal for educational reform that accommodates both reason and sensibility because she believes that self-governance and self-directing agency require both. While Wollstonecraft's work focuses on education in the traditional sense of instruction, Austen's work also focuses on education, but in the broader sense of socialization. The feminine experiences documented in Austen's novels of social pursuits and marriages closely resemble the educational experiences that Wollstonecraft describes.

Wollstonecraft and Austen develop radical critiques of sensibility in which female education is scrutinized and found to foster sensibility in women without cultivating their sense or reason. However, neither Wollstonecraft nor Austen suggests that sensibility is valueless in their extreme assessments. Both see the cooperation of head and heart as crucial to female agency and argue that it is important for women to promote a personal balance of reason and sensibility, not just attending to one or the other as the more essential faculty. Wollstonecraft and Austen contend that both reason and sensibility are essential in constituting women's agency and distinguishing themselves as virtuous, self-governing, autonomous individuals.

My previous coursework in Professor Nazar's ENGL 300 course (Fall 2014) has prepared me with preliminary ideas about this topic and how to approach both Austen and Wollstonecraft using a feminist critical lens. Working with Professor Nazar again

this semester has expanded and refined my analyses and work in this area. I plan to consolidate these concepts and arguments from my academic experiences over the past year into the culminating project of my senior honors thesis.

Bibliography

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Knox-Shaw, Peter. *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

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