

## MARRIAGE, MORALITY, AND DEPENDENCY: CONSTRUCTING WOMEN'S SOCIAL IDENTITY IN REGENCY ENGLAND

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**Abstract:** Marriage and moral ideology were central forces shaping women's social identity in late eighteenth–early nineteenth century England. This article examines how women's lives were regulated through interconnected expectations of virtue, obedience, and domestic responsibility, arguing that marriage functioned as a key social mechanism reinforcing gender hierarchy. Drawing on feminist literary criticism and social history, the study analyzes how legal dependency, limited education, and moral surveillance contributed to women's restricted autonomy. By situating these structures within their historical context, the article demonstrates that marriage in Regency England was not merely a personal institution but a cultural system that defined women's value and social legitimacy. This framework provides an essential background for interpreting women's representation in English literature, particularly in the novels of Jane Austen.

**Keywords:** marriage, morality, women's social identity, gender ideology, Regency England, feminist criticism

### INTRODUCTION

In late eighteenth–early nineteenth century England, marriage was widely regarded as the defining institution of a woman's life. A woman's economic security, moral reputation, and social respectability were closely bound to her marital status, making marriage not simply a personal choice but a social necessity. Within a patriarchal legal and cultural system, women's identities were constructed in relation to domestic roles and male authority, while alternatives to marriage were socially discouraged and economically precarious.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding marriage as a social institution rather than a purely emotional or private arrangement is essential for analyzing women's social identity in the Regency period. Feminist scholars have emphasized that marriage functioned as a stabilizing force within patriarchal society, regulating women's behavior while presenting dependence as moral virtue.<sup>2</sup> This article explores how marriage, moral ideology, and economic dependency worked together to shape women's social identity, limiting their autonomy while defining their social value. By examining these interconnected mechanisms, the study provides a socio-cultural framework that is particularly relevant for interpreting women's representation in English literature, including the works of Jane Austen.

### METHODS

This study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in feminist theory and social history. Rather than focusing on close readings of individual literary texts, the research examines cultural discourse surrounding marriage, femininity, and morality in Regency England. Primary attention is given to historical accounts of women's lives, conduct literature, and influential feminist interpretations that address gender ideology and domestic norms.

The methodological approach emphasizes contextual analysis, allowing for an examination of how social expectations shaped women's lived experiences. Feminist criticism is used to uncover the ideological assumptions underlying traditional representations of marriage



and morality, while social-historical research provides empirical grounding for the analysis. This combined approach enables a nuanced understanding of how women's social identity was constructed and maintained.

## RESULTS

The analysis reveals that marriage functioned as a central organizing principle in women's lives, shaping their social identity from early childhood onward. Girls were educated and socialized with the explicit aim of becoming suitable wives, with emphasis placed on obedience, modesty, and domestic competence. Intellectual independence and ambition were generally discouraged, as they were considered incompatible with feminine virtue.<sup>3</sup> As a result, women entered adulthood with limited preparation for self-sufficiency and few socially acceptable alternatives to marriage.

Economic dependency further reinforced marriage as a necessity. Legal structures such as *coverture* ensured that married women lacked financial and legal autonomy, while unmarried women relied on male relatives for support. Even when women engaged in paid labor, their work was poorly compensated and rarely provided social mobility or authority.<sup>4</sup> These conditions made marriage the most reliable means of achieving economic stability and social respectability.

Moral ideology played a crucial role in sustaining this system. Female virtue was closely associated with sexual purity, emotional restraint, and submission to male authority. Women's behavior was subject to constant moral surveillance, and reputation functioned as a powerful form of social regulation. Any deviation from accepted norms risked social condemnation, while conformity was rewarded with respectability and limited security.<sup>5</sup> Together, these legal, economic, and moral mechanisms narrowed the range of acceptable female identities and reinforced women's dependency on marriage for social legitimacy.

## DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that women's dependency in Regency England was not accidental or individual but systematically produced through interconnected social structures. Marriage operated as a cultural institution that preserved gender hierarchy while disguising inequality as moral order and emotional fulfillment. Feminist critics such as Mary Poovey and Claudia L. Johnson have argued that ideals of feminine propriety functioned as ideological tools, shaping women's behavior while limiting their access to power.<sup>6</sup>

Literature played a crucial role in exposing the contradictions inherent in this system. Although women were largely excluded from political and legal authority, novels provided a space in which women's experiences could be represented and critically examined. Through depictions of emotional conflict, moral judgment, and social negotiation, literary texts revealed the tensions between individual desire and social expectation. This context is particularly relevant for understanding Jane Austen's treatment of marriage, which often combines irony with moral seriousness. Austen does not reject marriage outright; rather, she interrogates its conditions, limitations, and consequences for women.

By situating marriage within its socio-historical context, this study highlights how women's social identity was shaped by necessity rather than free choice. Marriage emerges not as a romantic ideal but as a complex social mechanism that both constrained and defined women's lives. This perspective challenges simplified readings of marriage in Regency literature and underscores the importance of historical context in feminist literary analysis.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined the role of marriage and moral ideology in constructing women's social identity in late eighteenth–early nineteenth century England. The analysis demonstrates that marriage functioned as a central mechanism through which women's dependency was maintained and gender hierarchy reinforced. Legal structures, limited educational opportunities, and moral surveillance collectively constrained women's autonomy and shaped their social roles.



By analyzing marriage as a social institution rather than a purely personal arrangement, the study contributes to feminist and literary scholarship and provides a contextual foundation for interpreting women's representation in English literature. Understanding the social realities underlying marriage allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how authors such as Jane Austen depict women's struggles, negotiations, and limited forms of agency within a restrictive society.

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