

‘What think you of books?’:
Reading in *Pride and Prejudice*

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To the attentive reader, the emphasis on reading in Jane Austen’s novels is striking, as is Austen’s accomplished deployment of her own reading in the creation of her fiction. Discussions of books and reading are an important way in which Austen’s characters and her readers are trained to identify, categorize and assess character. The books and writers which are either mentioned by name or referred to obliquely, the frequency of quotation and allusion, and the discussions of books, writing, and ideas, which occur in Austen’s novels present the reader with a rich intellectual experience, belying the apparent limitations of the fictional material of ‘3 or 4 Families in a Country Village.’¹

Although the reading of books and the reading of character are intimately connected in all Austen’s novels, this connection becomes crucial in *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel which declares itself, from its title onward, to be primarily

¹ As Jane Austen described her favourite material for fiction to her niece Anna Austen, on 9 September 1814. See *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn 1952) p. 401.

The major studies of Jane Austen’s use of her reading are Frank Bradbrook, *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), which takes up F. R. Leavis’ argument about the importance of the literary tradition on Jane Austen’s writing in *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), and Kenneth Moler, *Jane Austen’s Art of Allusion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968). A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), discusses Austen’s use of her reading in her fiction, finding in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen’s ‘use of conventions and stock situations drawn from eighteenth-century fiction’ (p. 99). Q.D. Leavis argues for *First Impressions* as Jane Austen’s recasting of Fanny Burney’s *Cecilia* in realistic terms, in ‘A Critical Theory of Jane Austen’s Writing’,

concerned with the reading and judgement of character.² However, the correct reading response — and particularly the heroine's response to the hero — is not won without a struggle, and the novel's title suggests that initial misreadings are hazards through which the heroine must navigate. From the evidence of *Pride and Prejudice*, we can speculate that Jane Austen would not say that we are wise about other people simply because we read books, but she would subscribe to the view that someone whose reading of books is sufficiently developed, is also capable of shrewd character reading. But this ability is potential — the cautionary tale of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* is always before us — and even the otherwise exemplary Elizabeth Bennet must reform her opinion of Darcy in the course of the novel.

Reading is particularly important for Jane Austen's female characters. Young women must develop careful character reading skills, otherwise they may marry unwisely, and plunge themselves and their families into trouble for the rest of their lives, as Lydia Bennet does. Marrying the wrong woman

Scrutiny, Vol X, No. 1, p. 71. The most recent contribution to the study of this aspect of Austen's fiction is Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), which is a far-reaching study emphasizing both the content and method of her allusive style. A general survey of Jane Austen's actual and probable reading as it informs her novels can be found in Margaret Anne Doody, 'Jane Austen's Reading', *The Jane Austen Handbook*, ed. J. David Grey (London: Athlone Press, 1986). Discussions of the activity of reading in specific novels are to be found in Gary Kelly, 'Reading Aloud in *Mansfield Park*, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (June, 1982), which concentrates on the reading or preaching of sermons in *Mansfield Park*, and Robert Uphaus, 'Jane Austen and Female Reading', *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (Fall, 1987), which discusses the woman reader in and of *Sense and Sensibility*.

- 2 Not only does *Pride and Prejudice* contain many references to other writing and to its characters' reading, but, like most of Austen's published novels, it has its genesis in her earlier writing, in this case, the epistolary novel, *First Impressions*. See Q.D. Leavis, pp. 64-6.

is not so bad if one has a library as a sanctuary, as does Mr Bennet, but his realization of the extent of his mistake is revealed by his advice to Elizabeth: 'let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner if life.'³ In Jane Austen's fictional world, the choice of an appropriate spouse is a necessary activity, and sets the course of one's life. Hence the famous first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. (p. 1)

which is rather sinisterly mirrored later in the novel by this variation for women:

Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her [Charlotte Lucas's] object; it was the only honourable pelop careful character reading women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (p. 111)

While the first sentence of the novel is provocatively ironic, parodying the powerful discourse of Enlightenment philosophical writing, the later statement of Charlotte's aim is only partially so. Austen does not equivocate about the necessity of Charlotte's decision, nor about the conditions of a woman's life without marriage. The decision to marry Mr Collins is represented literally as life-saving, in physical as well as economic terms. Marriage will save Charlotte not only from want, but will preserve her honour, and save her from contravening the correct sexual, social, and economic roles of women.

Approved reading for young women in the late eighteenth century was not that which would encourage diligent study. Jane Austen expresses her views forcefully about this recommended reading in *Pride and Prejudice*. She does this principally through her presentation of Mr Collins and his advice about his cousins' reading, first revealed in his attempt at reading aloud to the Bennet ladies:

³ *Pride and Prejudice* (1813; Oxford University Press, The World's Classics, 1980), p. 335. All further references are to this edition.

a book was produced; but on beholding it, (for everything announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels....after some deliberation he chose Fordyce's Sermons. (p. 60)

This episode is rich in comic interest, with its portrayal of the ill-assorted Bennet family and picture of the pompous Mr Collins. His horror of the books from the circulating library matches that of Sir Anthony Absolute, in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, who declares that 'a circulating library in a town is, as an ever-green tree, of diabolical knowledge!'⁴ However, an examination of Mr Collins' preferred reading material reveals the full scope of Austen's ironic invention, and the importance of her use of books and reading in the creation of her irony.

James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* were first published in two volumes in 1766, and enjoyed long-lived popularity.⁵ The *Sermons* are representative of the conduct-book literature considered suitable educational material for women in the eighteenth century. Inevitably, such literature was circumscribed by the patriarchal ideology of the period, intensified, somewhat paradoxically, by the increasingly radical political movements of the Age of Reason. As Alison Sulloway argues, a 'compensatory equation' developed whereby as the 'Rights of Man' became increasingly part of an enlightened and rational debate, any 'Rights of Woman' were denied by those very same arguments of Reason and Enlightenment.⁶ Women's minds and bodies were to be used as the bastions of order and control, and, in extreme cases, counter-revolution. This displacement of responsibility for the maintenance of social order from men to women is evident in Fordyce's *Sermons*, which are addressed to such

4 Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Rivals*, in *Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), I, ii, p.21.

5 *Sermons to Young Women* (T. Cadell & J. Dodsley, London, 1786, 10th edn). All further references are to this edition.

6 *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 4.

topics as 'On Modesty of Apparel', 'On Female Reserve', 'On Female Virtue', 'On Female Virtue, Friendship, and Conversation', 'On Female Virtue, with Domestic and Elegant Accomplishments', and 'On Female Virtue, with Intellectual Accomplishments'.

It is fascinating to speculate on Mr Collins' choice of sermon. Perhaps he began to read this passage from Sermon IV, 'On Female Virtue':

The man that behaves with open rudeness, the man that avowedly laughs at virtue, the man that impudently pleads for vice; such a man is to be shunned like a rattle-snake. In this case, "The woman that deliberates is lost." What! would you parley with the destroyer, when he gives you warning? Then you are not ensnared, you knowingly and willingly expose yourselves. If you be poisoned, if you be lost; your folly is without excuse, and your destruction without alleviation.

But ... artful men ... will be silent and slow; all will be soft insinuation: or else they will put on a blunt face of seeming good humour, the appearance of honest frankness, drawing you to every scene of dissipation with a kind of obliging violence But how, you will ask, is the snare to be eluded, hidden as it frequently is? Not so hidden throughout, as to be invisible, unless you will shut your eyes. Is it not your business to enquire into the character of the man that professes an attachment? Or is character nothing? ... May you not learn, if you please, with whom the person in question associates? Or is a man's choice of company nothing? If not resolved to be blind, you may surely discover whether such a person proceeds by little and little to take off the visor, ... I blush for numbers of your sex, who not only express no displeasure at these things, but by a loud laugh, or a childish titter, or foolish simper, show real satisfaction, perhaps high complacence. (pp. 129-32)

While this sermon contains important lessons for Lydia, who is always laughing thoughtlessly, such advice is worthless from the mouth of a man who has earlier admitted to Mr Bennet that 'I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such elegant little compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions' although he 'always wish[es] to give

them as unstudied an air as possible' (p.60). His corruption of the phrase from the *Book of Common Prayer* - 'Prayers and Thanksgivings upon several Occasions'⁷ - reveals Mr Collins as a kind of rural English Tartuffe, the evidence he gives of the studied nature of his public character casting him as one of the 'artful men' against whom Fordyce warns his readers.

Perhaps, after his near-corruption by novels, Mr Collins reads from Fordyce's caution against 'Profligate and Improper Books':

Happy indeed, beyond the vulgar storytelling tribe, and highly to be praised, is he who, to fine sensibilities and a lively fancy superadding clear and comprehensive views of men and manners, writes to the heart with simplicity and chasteness, through a series of adventures well conducted, and relating chiefly to scenes in ordinary life; where the solid joys of Virtue, and her sacred sorrows, are strongly contrasted with the hollowness and the horrors of vice; where, by little and unexpected yet natural incidents of the tender and domestic kind, so peculiarly fitted to touch the soul, the most important lessons are impressed, and the most generous sentiments awakened; ...

Amongst the few works of this kind that I have seen, I cannot but look on those of Mr Richardson as well entitled to the first rank; ... an author, to whom your sex are under singular obligations for his uncommon attention to the best interests; but particularly for presenting, in a character sustained throughout with inexpressible pathos and delicacy, the most exalted standard of female excellence that was ever held up to their imitation. I would be understood to except that part of Clarissa's conduct, which the author meant to exhibit as exceptionable. Setting this aside, we find in her character a beauty, a sweetness, an artlessness—what shall I say more?—a sanctity of sentiment and manner, which, I own for my part, I have never seen equalled in any book of that sort; yet such, at the same time, as appears no way impracticable for any woman who is ambitious of excelling.

⁷ I am grateful to Professor Yasmine Gooneratne for alerting me to this point.

Beside the beautiful productions of that incomparable pen, there seem to me to be very few, in the style of the Novel, that you can read with safety, and yet fewer that you can read with advantage.—What shall we say of certain books, which we are assured (for we have not read them) are in their nature to be shameful, in their tendency to be pestiferous, and contain such rank treason against the royalty of Virtue, such horrible violation of all decorum, that she who can bear to peruse them must in her soul be a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will...

Nor do we condemn those writings only, that, with an effrontery which defies the laws of God and men, carry on their very forehead the mark of the beast. We consider the general run of Novels as utterly unfit for you. Instruction they convey none. They paint scenes of pleasure and passion altogether improper for you to behold, even with the mind's eye. Their descriptions are often loose and luscious in a high degree; their representations of love between the sexes are almost universally overstrained. (pp. 144-9)

These last references to prostitution and corruption are particularly disturbing from the pen of the Reverend Fordyce, and possibly, the mouth of Mr Collins. Both men display a distastefully proprietorial air towards the women whom they address. When he hears of the Bennet girls' handsomeness and amiability, Mr Collins is only too ready to claim cousinship - or indeed a closer relationship - while Mr Fordyce justifies the writing of his sermons with the explanation that

It is natural for me to wish well to my own sex; and therefore you will not wonder, if I be solicitous for your possessing every quality that can render you agreeable companions in a relation which of all others is the most intimate, should be the most endearing, and must be the happiest or the worst. (p. 33)

The matrimonial plans of Mr Collins and Mr Fordyce smack of procurement, and a self-interested delight in the obtaining of beautiful and chaste young female bodies in marriage. The analogy with the buying and selling of flesh in prostitution is unsettling, and Austen's observation of Mr Collins' marriage plans suggests that she too is disturbed by

a society which condones such behaviour. Here Austen is in agreement with Mary Wollstonecraft's damning critique of Fordyce in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.⁸ Wollstonecraft sees through the ideological piety of Fordyce's writing, exposing his debilitating and corrupting view of femininity, insisting instead that conduct books should 'Speak to them [women] in the language of truth and soberness, and away with the lullaby strains of condescending endearment!', and that women should 'be taught to respect themselves as rational creatures'.⁹ Like Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen understands the importance of rational and moderate guidance for young women, in order to instil in them self-possession and intellectual and moral independence.

In her use of Fordyce, Austen shows Mr Collins to be an indifferent if not entirely stupid reader, and also an hypocrite. Two incidents which occur directly after his reading aloud dramatize Mr Collins' obtuseness as a reader and reveal the corruption of his character. The day after Mr Collins' attempt at entertaining the Bennet women, he invades Mr Bennet's library, where he becomes 'nominally engaged with one of the largest folios in the collection', but actually talks to Mr Bennet 'with little cessation, of his house and garden at Hunsford'. The suggestion that Mr Collins attend the Bennet ladies in their walk to Meryton is seized on with alacrity by Mr Collins, who was 'in fact much better fitted for a walker than a reader' (p. 63). In this small incident of ordinary domestic life, Mr Collins is revealed as a male impostor, who must retreat to the company of women where he can pretend to the superior knowledge, education, and intellect granted him by virtue of his sex only. Jane Austen exposes his assertion of masculinity through reading

8 For more detailed arguments about Austen's sympathy with Wollstonecraft see Sulloway, p. 15, Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 52-64, and Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 155-7.

9 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 193.

— not that Mr Collins chooses one of the largest folios in the collection — as a performance and a facade.

In the other sense of reading, too, Mr Collins is an impostor. His proposal to Elizabeth is a comic scene of misreading. After Elizabeth's refusal of his advances, Mr Collins goes further in his assumption of masculine superiority and reveals his great worldly knowledge by assuring himself and Elizabeth that he is well-versed in the ways of the world:

'I am not *now* to learn ... that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time....' (p. 96, my emphasis)

And after Elizabeth's further outright, and very distressing, denials of any desire to marry him, Mr Collins again advances his wisdom:

'... I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character.' (p. 97)

At this point the reader might legitimately ask about the source of Mr Collins' knowledge of female behaviour during courtship. Such notions as these sound suspiciously as though they come from one of those very lending-library novels that Mr Collins abjures and abhors — those novels of which, like Mr Fordyce, he pretends only knowledge enough to know that they are not improving.

These incidents involving Mr Collins are examples of the ways in which Austen uses reading in the construction of her satire: it is both a direct means of characterization, and part of the ironic structure of her novel. Austen's enrichment of her text by connecting it with other texts — as obvious as her reference to Fordyce's *Sermons*, or as subtle as her rewriting of *Sir Charles Gradison*¹⁰ or *Cecilia* — are important means

¹⁰ See Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory*, Chapter 4.

of organizing her material and her authorial point of view. Mr Collins is satirized by means of his reading, and his abilities and tastes as a reader are shown to be misguided and stunted. The further critical irony is that by virtue of his social position and gender, Mr Collins is able to exert control over other characters, particularly Elizabeth, who are shown to be his intellectual and moral superiors. Elizabeth is almost trapped by Mr Collins' reading practices and his insistence on his superior knowledge of her character and her sex; she can only be rescued by another man, her father, who, for one extraordinary moment, allows his reading in the library to be interrupted by the affairs of his family (pp. 100-101).

This mention of Mr Bennet's bookish retreat leads me to consider the place of libraries in *Pride and Prejudice*. Libraries — ideally places where 'serious' (as opposed to female) reading is done and masculine wisdom acquired — actually perform quite other functions in *Pride and Prejudice*. In a parallel to her use of reading, Jane Austen manipulates her characters' possession and use of books to reveal the imperfections hidden by their social facades. Mr Bennet's library is a place of retreat from his duties as a father; he is rarely motivated to emerge from it, doing so only in great emergencies, and then to little effect, as is the case of his journey to London to find Lydia after her elopement. For the pretentious Miss Bingley, Mr Darcy's library at Pemberley represents only his established wealth and class position, and an opportunity to establish her own social ascendancy over Elizabeth, as she ostentatiously expresses her surprise that 'my father should have left so small a collection of books' (p. 32). However, Miss Bingley's attempt at asserting her superior social position and breeding rebounds against her. Miss Bingley's mention of Pemberley's library is as a commodity by which to measure status, and reveals Miss Bingley as indeed an inheritor of her father's mercenary tradition. This is not to say that Jane Austen is a snob — quite the contrary. Her portrait of the Gardiners is affectionate and positive. Here again, reading is an important indicator of character. Although engaged in trade, the Gardiners read books for

information and enlightenment, not social cachet, and Mrs Gardiner is able to join with Elizabeth in her playful allusions to the travel literature of the period (p. 138). For Elizabeth and her aunt, shared reading enriches a loving relationship which is celebrated by the novel's final sentence.

While reading is a significant activity in *Pride and Prejudice*, it is by no means a simple one to interpret. The case of Mr Bennet, another great reader, is pertinent here: as a father, his power over his family is absolute, yet he rarely issues forth from his library to exert his patriarchal control for the benefit of his daughters. It is presumably from this library that the volume of Fordyce's *Sermons* comes, although neither Mr Bennet nor his daughters appear to find its contents enlightening. Only once does Mr Bennet's parental judgement achieve a sound result, when he forbids Elizabeth's marriage to Mr Collins. However, Mr Bennet's prohibition of the marriage is stated equivocally:

'An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents.—Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr Collins, and I will never see you again if you do.' (p. 100)

This epigrammatic statement is stylish and witty, as befitting and well-read man, but lacking in fatherly concern or affection. After delivering Elizabeth from her nightmare, he withdraws from the family storm, retreating into the 'leisure and tranquility' of his library, saying to his wife:

'My dear, ... I have two small favours to request. First, that you will allow me the free use of my understanding on the present occasion; and secondly, of my room. I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be.' (p. 101)

These are eminently reasonable words, and very well expressed, as are all Mr Bennet's speeches in the novel, but they are indicative of someone who deals with those around him as with a problem in logic or a set of philosophical aphorisms. Mr Bennet is obviously a highly skilled reader, but for him, this activity is a retreat from the world of getting and spending — and marrying. All Mr Bennet's reading in

his haven of logic and order (for libraries are places with books in order) does not equip him to deal with his family.

Through Mr Bennet, Jane Austen shows us that reading is only effective when it is united with an active engagement in the world. From this balance of reflection and action comes the skill of reading character, of correctly judging one's fellow human beings — that skill which is so crucial for young women. The reading of character is a social skill, but it comes from a foundation of solid and judicious reading of literature, in the same way that the novel *Pride and Prejudice* is detailed and observant about the conditions of ordinary life, but also places them within a wider world of art, through reference to other literature. It is only when Darcy and Elizabeth can successfully combine the two types of reading that the opening prophecy of the novel is fulfilled and Elizabeth saved from the fate worse than death which face Charlotte Lucas.

The central relationship of the novel, that of Elizabeth and Darcy, is the most interesting example of the importance of reading in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is significant that Darcy's abrupt and ungentle declaration of love is followed by a letter, the written communication attempting to explain his actions as he could not in person. In the course of reading this letter, Elizabeth learns about both Darcy and herself, realizing that 'Till this moment, I never knew myself' (p. 185). Elizabeth's response to Darcy's letter is a microcosmic account of the process of Elizabeth's education in the reading of character throughout the novel, culminating in this private self-examination and realization of her prejudice.

It is with her reading of his letter that Elizabeth begins her mature reading of Darcy's character, and, in this process, her resistance to being read by Mr Darcy is broken down. At Pemberley, Elizabeth goes in search of Darcy's picture in the family portrait gallery, and stands before it, 'fix[ing] his eyes upon herself' (p. 220). This is a rehearsal of her revelation of herself to the flesh-and-blood Darcy at Longbourne. Her use of his portrait as a proxy for Darcy's presence, and her defiant and deliberate presentation of herself here as material

to be 'read', foreshadow her decision to speak of her gratitude, and indeed, admit her feelings for Darcy in a forthright manner during their walk together at Longbourne (p. 324). Here, she bravely opens herself and her actions and feelings to Darcy, to be interpreted and understood. Elizabeth's behaviour during this walk with Mr Darcy is described in terms of 'resolution', and 'courage'; as she, 'feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety ... now forced herself to speak' (p. 325). This is in great contrast to her lively conversation with Mr Darcy in the first volume of the novel, in which she uses wit and verbal brilliance to protect herself from Mr Darcy's discernment of her feelings:

'What think you of books?' said he, smiling.

'Books—Oh! no.—I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings.'

'I am sorry you think so; but if that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject.—We may compare our different opinions.'

'No—I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else.' (p. 83)

Elizabeth's evasiveness is important here: through it, she resists any categorization or definition of her character or abilities. Her apparently frivolous unwillingness to exchange opinions with Mr Darcy on books is an act of resistance. To become involved in such a discussion with Mr Darcy would be to reveal herself, and in so doing, place herself at an even greater disadvantage than she already is, as a young woman who is not an heiress. Elizabeth is strong in defence of her autonomy, and aware of the dangers of self-revelation to such a critic as Mr Darcy. Throughout this conversation with Mr Darcy, Elizabeth maintains her right to form her own opinions, including an independent view of Mr Darcy himself.

As Barbara Hardy argues, Jane Austen is an innovator in English fiction, bringing together the private world of her

characters and the public world of society.¹¹ This new type of novel combines all the exciting exoticism of the Gothic romance with the domestic prosaic qualities of Samuel Richardson's realistic novels. Such a combination establishes and authorizes a feminine romance plot which not only values the domestic, but which is actually structured by the patterns of the female life, of marriage, comfortable love, of affection and esteem. Elizabeth's gradual conversion from dislike of Darcy to her 'gratitude and pleasure' (p. 325) at receiving his love is a fine example of the innovative romance structure which Jane Austen creates. When Elizabeth admits to her sister that her love

has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley (p. 332)

her albeit joking admission emphasizes the domestic and familial contexts in which Elizabeth and Darcy are reacquainted in Volume III of the novel. Elizabeth's visions of Darcy — both in body and in portrait — suggest a view of domestic love which is central to Jane Austen's fiction.

In establishing this female romance form, Jane Austen's practice of literary quotation invests her novels with an authority usually denied to women as speakers. In her apparently artless and limited domestic fictions, Jane Austen expresses a highly literate, and critical view of her world, through her use of self-reflexive use of reading and quotation. Jane Austen's invention of the female romance emerges as a profoundly woman-centred response to restrictions of time, place, and class. Her challenge, however, is carefully placed in fictions which are secured at the centre of the English literary culture by their constant and profound reference to that tradition.

11 Barbara Hardy, *A Reading of Jane Austen* (London: Peter Owen, 1975), p. 21.