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Laura Vorachek

*University of Dayton*, lvorachek1@udayton.edu

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# Intertextuality and Ideology: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*

Laura Vorachek  
University of Alabama

In *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* and other works, Jocelyn Harris has demonstrated the importance of Austen's literary contexts for understanding and appreciating Austen's art.<sup>1</sup> One context for understanding *Pride and Prejudice* is the conduct book it mentions by name, James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*. Mr. Collins chooses it to read aloud to the Bennet girls, and, when Lydia interrupts him, he responds: "I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit."<sup>2</sup> I would argue that reading *Pride and Prejudice* next to Fordyce's *Sermons* reveals that Austen was, not only "interested" in this text, but actively engaged with its proscriptions. Mr. Collins's statement, then, becomes ironic, hinting at Austen's playful response to this "serious" book. While critics have examined Austen's works in light of the conduct literature of the period, they argue either that Austen falls in line with conduct books or that she completely rejects their advice.<sup>3</sup> However, reading these two texts together illuminates a more complex relationship between Austen and the prevailing ideology of her time. Austen's depiction of characters and relationships indicates that she picks and chooses among Fordyce's dictums, which suggests both the limited power of this ideology and that Fordyce's book served as fodder for her creative imagination.

The relationship of conduct books to ideology has long been a matter of critical debate. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse argue that conduct books have "created and maintained specific forms of political authority," or the ideology of their society.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, their proscriptions and expressions of cultural values focus on restraining women's desires in order to maintain patriarchy. And, indeed, Fordyce urges "discreet reserve in a woman" because he has "the best interests of society" in mind, a society which, if it followed his advice, would perpetuate male dominance and female meekness.<sup>5</sup> However, Vivien Jones theorizes that conduct books offered possibilities for both female pleasure and resistance to patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> Following Jones, I will show that *Pride and Prejudice*

presents instances of Austen's playful resistance to the ideology represented in Fordyce's *Sermons*. By accepting some proscriptions, using others to develop her own comic characters, and rejecting others outright in her novel, Austen provides evidence that reader reception of conduct books was neither unanimous or uniformly compliant.

Austen's novel most closely follows Fordyce on the issue of female virtue. In the *Sermons*, Fordyce tells his female audience that "the honour and peace of a family are ... much more dependent on the conduct of daughters than of sons; and one young lady going astray shall subject her relations to such discredit and distress, as united good conduct of all her brothers and sisters, supposing numerous, shall scarce ever be able to repair" (17). This notion that the ill conduct of one daughter will throw disgrace on the entire family is reflected in the common reaction to Lydia's elopement with Wickham. Mr. Collins writes to the Bennets: "They [Mrs. Collins and Lady Catherine] agree with me in apprehending that this false step in one daughter, will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others, for who, as Lady Catherine herself condescendingly says, will connect themselves with such a family" (225). His attitude is not surprising, given his close association with conduct-book morality, nor is Lady Catherine's, as she is concerned with preserving social distinctions.<sup>7</sup>

One might be tempted to reject the opinion of an officious toady and his intrusive patroness, but Elizabeth invokes similar rhetoric when she tries to persuade her father not to let Lydia go to Brighton:

Our importance, our respectability in the world must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia's character ... [If she is not checked,] she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous ... Oh! my dear father, can you suppose it possible that they [Lydia and Kitty] will not be censured and despised wherever they are known, and that their sisters will not be often involved in the disgrace? (176-77)

Such similar sentiments expressed by both comical and sensible characters suggest that Austen accords with Fordyce on this matter. So, too, do the consequences of Lydia's behaviour. Lydia does indeed "subject her relations to such discredit and distress" as to send her mother into hysterics, her father into a depression, and, to all appearances, to ruin Elizabeth's chances of a match with Darcy.

Fordyce suggests that women can maintain their virtue and preserve the “honour and peace” of their family by “avoid[ing] Dangerous Connexions”—advice which brings to mind the character of Wickham. Fordyce admits, however, that “What those dangerous connexions are, it may not always be easy to explain when it becomes a question in real life. Unhappily for young women, it is a question sometimes of very nice definition” (128). The ability to distinguish those men who threaten one’s virtue becomes especially difficult when they

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, should violence of any kind be necessary. If they also be agreeable in their persons, or lively in their conversation; above all, if they wear the air of gentlemen, which, unfortunately for your sex, is too often the case; then indeed the danger is extreme. (129-30)

This is a suitable description of the handsome Wickham, an easy conversationalist who is noted, at his first appearance in the novel, for his “most gentlemanlike appearance” and whose “manners recommend him to every body” (54 and 64). His “appearance of honest frankness” initially fools Elizabeth, who finds “truth in his looks” as proof of his claims against Darcy (65). And he does indeed “draw” Lydia into “dissipation,” scuttling the original plan of eloping to Gretna Green for an unwed sojourn in London instead.

Against such a man, “what can preserve you?” Fordyce asks. “A sense of reputation? the dread of ruin? Perhaps they may, but perhaps not” (130). Since Lydia has neither a sense of reputation or a thought of ruin, there is nothing to save her from Wickham. Thus Austen appears to concur with Fordyce that threats to female virtue are real and not always easily detected.

As this discussion of “dangerous connexions” suggests, Fordyce’s pronouncements seem to serve as a springboard for the characters Austen develops in her novel. Mrs. Bennet, for instance, fits Fordyce’s description of bad parenting. He contends that young girls may be exposed to a little of the world, as long as this is kept in bounds: “But do the parents of the present generation commonly keep within them? Are not many of those parents as fond of gaiety and show, as the merest girl can possibly be? Is it surprising to see the daughters of such become very early the votaries of Folly ...?” (90). And it is not surprising that

Kitty and Lydia share their mother's fondness for clothes, balls, men in regimentals, and such ill-conceived romantic machinations as sending Jane to Netherfield on a horse in the rain or eloping with Wickham.

While the comedy arising from Mrs. Bennet's behaviour serves to reinforce Fordyce's condemnation of such parental silliness, with other characters Austen manipulates the humour she invokes to undermine him. Lady Catherine, for example, bears some resemblance to Fordyce's lady pedant—"A woman that affects to dispute, to decide, to dictate on every subject; that watches or makes opportunities of throwing out scraps of literature, or shreds of philosophy, in every company; that engrosses the conversation as if she alone were qualified to entertain; that betrays, in short, a boundless intemperance of tongue ... such a woman is truly insufferable" (298). While Lady Catherine does not have the education that marks this (in Fordyce's opinion) disagreeable figure, that does not stop her from making pronouncements. She talks

without any intermission ... delivering her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to have her judgment controverted. She enquired into Charlotte's domestic concerns familiarly and minutely, and gave her a great deal of advice, as to the management of them all; told her how every thing ought to be regulated in so small a family as her's, and instructed her as to the care of her cows and her poultry. (126)

Indeed, she does "engross the conversation" and "dispute, decide and dictate on *every* subject." She appears to be a bit of a meteorologist as well, since, at the end of the evening, the party "gathered round the fire to hear Lady Catherine determine what weather they were to have on the morrow" (128). While she does not drop "scraps of literature or shreds of philosophy" into the conversation, she does feel free to comment on music, despite the fact that she has never learnt it, confident that, had she learned, she "should have been a great proficient" (133). She takes the liberty of commenting on Elizabeth's performance at Rosings, "mixing with [her remarks] many instructions on execution and taste" (135). On the surface then, Austen's adaptation of this figure does not contradict Fordyce's general complaint about learned women (even if only by their own estimation) dominating the conversation and making themselves "truly insufferable." However, Austen's apparent compliance is belied by the humour of the situation: Lady Catherine considers herself an authority when, in fact, she is uneducated and nosy.

Thus the reader laughs, not at the character of the lady pedant, but at Lady Catherine's pretensions to the stereotype. By directing the reader's ridicule to Lady Catherine's *lack* of knowledge, Austen makes it possible to take learned women seriously.

Mary Bennet is the character more commonly considered a "bluestocking" for her devotion to books and music, but she too falls short of the mark.<sup>8</sup> She gets this label in part for her affinities with Fordyce, since she, like Mr. Collins, mouths conduct books' clichéd moralisms.<sup>9</sup> For example, during a discussion of Mr. Darcy's pride, she remarks that, based on her reading, she knows that "Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain" (14). This closely follows Fordyce's warning to young women to maintain their pride and not let anyone play on their vanity with flattery. "Have you no ingenuous pride?" he asks. "Are you so very vain, (pride and vanity are different things) so very ignorant, after all the admonitions you have received, as still to construe flattery into approbation, and smiles into attachment?" (26). Mary's almost direct quotation of Fordyce, although in a different context, suggests that his is one of the tracts she spends her time studying as she aspires to learned-lady status.

However, Mary does not appear to have read Fordyce with care. He also warns: "We do not expect that women should always utter grave sentences, nor men neither. It were inconsistent with the state of mankind ... The frailty of human nature, and the infelicity of human life, require to be relieved and soothed. There are many occasions, on which this is not to be done by sage admonitions, or solemn reflexions" (182). Mary fails to recognise that Lydia's elopement is one such occasion that requires "relief and sooth[ing]" and not "sage admonitions." Rather, Mary, "with a countenance of grave reflection," says to Elizabeth, "Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson; that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—that one false step involves her in endless ruin—that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful,—and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behavior towards the undeserving of the other sex" (219). While she paraphrases Fordyce's admonition that women "Remember how tender a thing a woman's reputation is; how hard to preserve, and when lost how impossible to recover," she has overlooked his caution that "solemn reflexions" are not always welcome (44).

Likewise, Mary seems to have misunderstood Fordyce's recom-

mendations on women and music. He notes that there are women who have “made great proficiency in music; but it is as true, that they have made it at a vast expense of time and application; such as no woman ought to bestow upon an object, to which she is not carried by the irrefutable impulse of genius” (257). If not, “the practice will never reward the pains necessary for acquiring it” (257). Despite having “neither genius nor taste,” Mary fails to heed this warning (17). The result is her embarrassing performance at the Netherfield ball. Although she “work[s] hard for knowledge and accomplishments,” her effort, as Fordyce predicted, is not “rewarded”; audiences prefer Elizabeth’s “easy and unaffected” playing to Mary’s “pedantic air and conceited manner” (17). Once again, we are invited to laugh at a woman who aspires to pedantry. In this case, it is Mary’s poor reading comprehension that marks her for ridicule, rather than her knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Appropriately, the humour of this is especially available to careful readers of both Fordyce and Austen, rewarding the close attention to texts for which learned ladies were criticised.

While Austen indirectly undermines Fordyce on this point, there is much she directly challenges.<sup>11</sup> For example, Austen appears to take exception to Fordyce’s view of novels as without merit (those of Richardson excepted). One complaint Fordyce has about novels is their exaggerated depictions of love affairs:

their representations of love between the sexes are almost universally overstrained. All is dotage or despair; or else ranting swelled into burlesque. In short, the majority of their lovers are either mere lunatics or mock-heroes. A sweet sensibility, a charming tenderness, a delightful anguish, exalted generosity, heroic worth, and refinement of thought; how seldom are these best ingredients of virtuous love mixed with any judgment or care in the composition of their principal characters! (149-50)

Far from agreeing with Fordyce, Austen proves him wrong by presenting a love story that contains the elements he claims are lacking in contemporary novels. Neither “lunatics” nor “mock-heroes,” Elizabeth and Darcy enjoy “love mixed with ... judgment”—although, initially, it is their judgement of each other that contrives to keep them apart. As Elizabeth learns to see Darcy in a different light, she experiences “a delightful anguish,” realising her feelings for him just when it appears she has lost all hope of winning him. At the same time, Darcy exhibits

“exalted generosity” and “heroic worth” in finding Wickham and Lydia in London, arranging their marriage, and settling Wickham’s debts, thereby rescuing Elizabeth and her family from Lydia’s ignominy. And, although perhaps not quite what Fordyce meant, Elizabeth undergoes a “refinement of thought” when she comes to re-evaluate her prejudices against Darcy.

Austen also thwarts Fordyce with a heroine, in this love affair, who defies his notion of an attractive woman. Fordyce warns his readers that men do not find spirited women appealing, preferring the “bashful beauty” to the woman of wit (96). He notes that men “dislike” women who have “contracted a certain briskness of air and levity of deportment” (103). Elizabeth’s tendency to speak her mind and her witty, teasing responses to others would not meet with Fordyce’s approval, and, yet, it is exactly her lively, playful manners that attract Darcy. Thus, Fordyce’s warning that “men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a witty female” is disproved in the conclusion of Austen’s novel (192). Once engaged, Elizabeth, moreover, gives every indication that she will continue to behave this way to Darcy, telling him that “it belongs to me to find occasions for teasing and quarrelling with you as often as may be” (291).

Finally, Austen explores the relationship between marriage and money—a connection that Fordyce condemns. He complains:

The parents of the present generation, what with selling their sons and daughters in marriage, and what with teaching them by every possible means the glorious principles of Avarice, have contrived pretty effectually to bring down from its former flights that idle, youthful, unprofitable passion, which has for its object personal attractions, in preference to all the wealth of the world. (151)

In the face of Fordyce’s sentimental view of marriage, Austen presents the unromantic reality of many middle-class women, who had to marry to ensure their financial stability, through the marriage of Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins. Furthermore, Austen shows the lack of wisdom in marrying solely on the basis of “youthful passion” and “personal attractions,” through the marriages of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Lydia and Wickham. Austen demonstrates that marrying solely for physical attraction was “unprofitable” in more ways than one.

While conduct books such as Fordyce’s were representative of the cultural values of the period, Austen’s response to this particular text



suggests that those values were not as all-pervasive or as coercive as some have suggested. Rather, Austen's playful engagement with Fordyce's *Sermons* suggests a critical distance from the dominant ideology, one that allows her to evaluate and occasionally invert some of its pronouncements. Moreover, Austen makes resistance to Fordyce's patriarchal advice pleasurable for her readers as well, both through comic characters who pretend to pedantry, thereby making space for actual learned ladies, and through a witty heroine who marries despite his indication of improbability. Those readers who laugh at Lady Catherine and Mary Bennet and rejoice in Elizabeth's resolution are, therefore, complicit in Austen's subversion of the hegemonic narratives of her time.

### Endnotes

- 1 Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 2 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 52.
- 3 Penelope Joan Fritzer contends that Austen "is generally in accord with courtesy book advice" (*Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books* [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997] 6). However, Ilona Dobosiewicz, Marian Fowler, and Jan Fergus argue that Austen rejects eighteenth-century conduct manual counsel. See Ilona Dobosiewicz, *Female Relationships in Jane Austen's Novels: A Critique of the Female Ideal Propagated in 18th Century Conduct Literature* (Opole, Pol.: Wydawn Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 1997); Marian Fowler, "The Feminist Bias of *Pride and Prejudice*," *Dalhousie Review* 57 (1977): 47-64; and Jan Fergus, "Sex and Social Life in Jane Austen's Novels," in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (London: Macmillan, 1981) 66-85.
- 4 Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, introduction, in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987) 3.
- 5 James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, 11th ed. (1765; London: Cadell, 1792) 107 and iv.
- 6 p. 109 of Vivien Jones, "The Seductions of Conduct," in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Robert (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1996) 108-32.
- 7 Marian Fowler argues that "Mr. Collins is Fordyce writ large" (57). Likewise, Mary Waldron notes that Mr. Collins "is obviously a devotee of conduct books" and draws from Chesterfield as well as Fordyce (*Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999] 52).
- 8 Jocelyn Harris argues that Mary is "never rescue[d]" from this stereotype, in "Silent Women, Shrews, and Bluestockings" (p. 12 of *The Talk in Jane Austen*, ed. Bruce Stovel and Lynn Weinlos Gregg [Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2002] 3-22).

- 9 Marian Fowler, for example, claims that Mary “speaks with courtesy-book sententiousness” (57).
- 10 One can see why a book like Fordyce’s *Sermons* would appeal to Mary, as it offers consolation for those accomplished women “destitute of personal charms” who are often overlooked by men in favour of “handsome idiots” (301). Fordyce writes that the triumph of beautiful women “is commonly, like that of the wicked, short ... Men of at least any significance, are seldom long in recovering their senses” (302).
- 11 For example, Austen seems to take issue with Fordyce’s pronouncement that women cannot be friends or close sisters without jealousy intervening: “When I see two sisters, both of them pleasing and both esteemed, living together without jealousy or envy, yielding to one another without affectation, and generously contending who shall do most to advance the consequence and happiness of her friend; I am highly delighted: dare I say, the more highly, that such characters are not very common!” (198). Yet this aptly describes Elizabeth’s relationship with Jane. Dobosiewicz examines Austen’s depiction of mother/daughter, sister, and friend relationships in greater detail in *Female Relationships*, arguing that Austen subverts conduct manual representations (including Fordyce’s).