

Fordyce's Ideal Woman?

Sermons to Young Women: A Facsimile Reprint of the Tenth Edition, First Published 1786

By Dr. James Fordyce, with an introduction by Susan Allen Ford.

Chawton House Press, 2012. xxvi + 307 + 313 pages (two volumes in one).

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Review by A. Marie Sprayberry.

Possibly the only time anyone could describe Lydia Bennet as a literary critic is when Mr. Collins declines to read a novel to the Bennets and instead selects Dr. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*. Before her cousin has "with very monotonous solemnity, read three pages," Lydia bursts forth with the day's news from Meryton. Although Jane and Elizabeth rebuke Lydia for the interruption, at least it ends the reading.

Two centuries after the world first enjoyed this moment in *Pride and Prejudice*, I had "great hopes of finding [the *Sermons*] quite the reverse" (PP 71) of a good read. And even though I was fortified by Susan Allen Ford's excellent introduction to this republication—which provides a brief biography of Fordyce and places the *Sermons* in historical and literary context—my initial reaction to



Flowers cut from the garden at Jane Austen's House Museum are arranged by the Museum shop's Retail Manager, Ann Channon, and placed throughout the house.

the text itself was somnolence. To stay alert through the first few sermons, I started reading them aloud to my husband as if the 18th-century "long s" (resembling the modern "f") were actually an "f." Unfortunately, this form of "tormenting a respectable man" (PP 122) soon produced a good-humored request to "ceafe and defift."

More unfortunately, in my now-silent reading, I discovered an error in the printing: the last page of Volume 1 was omitted from the scan of the 1786 edition. Chawton House Library has already posted a downloadable erratum on its website; it promises that new copies of this printing will be sold with the page inserted, and that the page will be restored in the next printing.

My "learning curve" and the printing error aside, I found once I began exploring the *Sermons* that it provides ample scope for speculation. First, I tried to imagine myself as Elizabeth Bennet hearing the *Sermons*. For one thing, she might have disdained Fordyce's favorite rhetorical devices of flattering his readers in such terms as "my fair friends" and "my honoured hearers," and characterizing their ideal state as soft, docile, timid, and delicate; as both Ford and Mary Wollstonecraft have noted, all this gets creepy after a while. I also think she would have lost patience with his warnings against "Wit," particularly that "men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a witty female." But, most of all, I think she would have resented the double binds Fordyce constantly urges on his readers: "We wish to see you often smile; but we would not have you smile always, if it were possible... I could heartily wish to see the female world more accomplished than it is; but I do not wish it to abound with metaphysicians, historians ... or Learned Ladies of any kind." Elizabeth's approach to the latter dilemma, of course, is to mock the whole idea of "accomplished women."

But as I read on, I began to suspect that Jane Austen might in fact have created

Fordyce's ideal woman in one of her works—and not just her "Plan of a Novel," either. The recommended readings in Sermon VII first tipped

me off. Although the study of "war, commerce, politics, ... and all the abstruser sciences" should be avoided, as should "Novels and Romances" in general, young women are encouraged to read history, geography, and astronomy; accounts of voyages and travels; "Dramatic Writings also, where ... purity of thought [is] preserved"; and "Poetry of all kinds." Who, in her fireless east room, is reading just such books—and also disapproving of a play where "purity of thought" is *not* preserved? Once this idea entered my head, everything else started falling into place. I haven't space here for a tenth of the appropriate quotations, but "Female modesty is often silent; female decorum is never bold." Nevertheless, "No rules of duty can oblige you to involve yourselves in misery ... by entering into engagements to love and to honour, where your hearts withhold their consent."

So could Jane Austen have conceived Fanny Price as Fordyce's ideal woman? Is it possible that Austen, after her open dig and implicit criticisms in *Pride and Prejudice*, deliberately aimed for the other extreme in *Mansfield Park*? We'll never know. But I'm obliged to James Fordyce—and to Susan Allen Ford—for giving me a new perspective on *Mansfield Park*.

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