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There Are But Few Things Which Can Afford Us Greater Pleasure or Improvements

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The author of *New and elegant amusements for the ladies of Great Britain* (1772) is a Lady. Her publication serves to guide women in “sciences” that will help them improve their minds. The author’s aim is to instruct readers in the “Polite Arts and Sciences” because she feels that “…the heart-enlarging and improving Sciences, at this time give way to a more trifling round of fashionable Amusements” (vii). In other words, the Lady author is dismayed to find that women in her society are more focused on being amused than on improving developing rational thinking. In response to her concern for the women of Great Britain, she has written a treatise that will not only amuse ladies, but will also instruct them. In particular, the author explains astronomy, geography, maps, and the use of globes in a way in which she thinks ladies are better able to understand than the ways in which men learn these subjects. The Lady also divides what she views as the “Polite Arts and Sciences” into two groups: rational amusements and entertaining amusements.

Among the rational amusements is reading. In her treatise, the Lady writes how important she believes reading to be, especially since “…there are but few things which can afford us greater pleasure or improvement…” (51). The author is careful to present readers with authors and works which she believes will best guide women in their studies. The works do not include novels, which the Lady regards as “insipid” (51). Reading is a topic that is also discussed in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Mr. Darcy comments on Elizabeth reading during her visit to Netherfield after Jane has fallen ill. In chapter eight of the first volume of the novel, Miss Bingley describes the “accomplishments” she believes a woman should have (Austen 73). To Miss Bingley’s list of accomplishments Mr. Darcy adds, “‘All this she must possess’… ‘and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading’” (74). Mr. Darcy’s sentiments seem to mirror those expressed by the Lady in her treatise. That Mr. Darcy should expect a lady to improve her mind through extensive reading fits with what many in the Regency culture expected of women. Mr. Darcy approves of Elizabeth’s reading as would most men of his day. Miss Bingley also alludes to the fact that Pemberley has an extensive library, where readers would assume that Miss Bingley reads extensively. Ironically, Austen creates a character in her novel that would perhaps not approve of women reading novels. Thus, while Mr. Darcy’s beliefs about reading reflect those of many during the Regency period, Jane Austen’s beliefs appear different. Austen, at least, seems to challenge her society’s view of novels or the content that they typically present.
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