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## These Works of Fancy

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# Pride and Prejudice: The Student Blog

Thursday, March 7, 2013

## These Works of Fancy

John Burton's instructional text *Lectures on Female Education and Manners* (1793) illustrates a fascinating conflict in Regency English culture between the merits of acquired skill and the nobility of inherited talent, a dispute that is easily examined through the lens of female accomplishment. Accomplishment, a subject that surfaces repeatedly and divisively in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), is nebulously defined by Mr. Bingley as the ability to "paint tables, cover skreens, and net purses," while Miss Bingley asserts that a truly accomplished lady should also "have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages ... and possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions" (73-74). To all of this, Mr. Darcy adds that the accomplished lady "must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (Austen 74). The opinions of Miss Bingley and Mr. Darcy provide fine examples of the dichotomous view of achievement in Regency culture: Miss Bingley's championed "air," "manner," "tone," and "expressions" all speak to inherent qualities associated with the upper classes, while Darcy's "improvement ... by extensive reading" is accessible to young ladies of any rank or social stratum (Austen 74).

When the  
Spinnet or Harpsichord is touched by those, who  
have a mind and ear formed for harmony, the most  
delightful sounds may be produced, and cor-  
respondent emotions excited. But without the  
predispositions already mentioned, it will be toil  
and labour; it will be a mechanical exertion,  
tasteless and insipid in its effects.

Burton's *Lectures of Female Education and Manners* contains references to both viewpoints of achievement, particularly in Lecture IX, which is concerned with the acquisition of accomplished tasks. Burton establishes that skill in needlepoint (the most worthy and womanly task, he claims) is an acquired merit, and asserts that "to shade with skill ... require[s] some knowledge of colour ... [and] is no small effort" (127). He also attempts to bolster the respectability of such an endeavor by noting that the Queen has "instituted a kind of Academy for [needlepoint's] further progress and improvement" (Burton 128). Burton repeatedly refers to skill as a woman's "Genius," however, muddling the distinction between acquired and inherent talent (126, 127, 134). In discussing tasks like drawing and musical performance, Burton also takes a contradictory stance. He believes that some women are born with a "natural inclination for designing" or "a mind and ear formed for harmony," and he advises against the musical or artistic tutelage of students who do not possess these inherent abilities (135-36). In fact, he decries the musical education of untalented pupils as a dreadful waste of time and money and calls the forced performance of such a student "a mechanical exertion, tasteless and insipid in its effects" (136). Clearly, Burton believes that true skill in musical and artistic tasks are attainable only by some women, yet he begins his lecture by advising the necessity of these skills and others in reaching "accomplished" status. Burton's contradictory instructions for young women sharply illustrate the confusing ideas surrounding achievement and worth during the Regency. The competing concepts of acquirable and inherent talent within Burton's work highlight the subtle undertone of the conversation between Austen's characters in discussing accomplishment: that the shifting foundations of merit during the Regency were unstable and difficult to reconcile. Austen incisively incorporates this cultural conflict into *Pride and Prejudice*.

### About

A blog site featuring original research by undergraduate students at Wright State University enrolled in Crystal B. Lal's *Pride and Prejudice* (Spring 2011).

We hope you enjoy reading about the historical contexts surrounding famous novels. And be sure to participate in CELIA's Bicentennial events on October 2013. Click [here](#) for more information.

### Blog Archive

- ▼ 2013 (26)
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    - "Nothing so Unmilitary": Examining How Uniforms Influence the Physic or Exotic Garden
    - I Never in My Life Saw Anything More Elegant than ...
    - Why Will Thou Bind Thy Love Brow?
    - "But the clothes, the wedding clothes!": Fashionability
    - "Dancing is of More Importance to a Gentleman Than ..."
    - There Are But Few Things Which Can Afford Us Great Pleasure
    - I'll tune my pipe to playful notes ... And hail ...
    - Life is Really Too Short: Was Time with Regency ...
    - The Most Elegant Collateral Embellishment of Taste ...
    - The Importance of Practice
    - "From Every Window There Were Beauties to Be Seen" ...
    - Attract Notice by the Copiousness of His Talk ...
    - Thus Does Gaming Harden the Heart and Swallow up Emotions
    - "Harry Will be the Gentleman: The Nature of Men ..."
    - Pride, My Dear
    - These Works of Fancy
    - She Heard Him With A Visible Emotion
  - ▶ February (1)



In Mathias Darly's cartoon "**The Accomplish'd Maid**" (1778), pictured above, a woman plays the harpsichord while surrounded by embroidery, a shelf of books, and two landscapes (which she has possibly drawn herself). Her dress is outrageously modish and her posture and expression are calculatedly dignified (recalling Miss Bingley's description of an accomplished lady). Her pockets reveal correspondence that may suggest either her desirability (are they love letters?) or her social engagement. Darly's satirical presentation of the ideal woman (she's notably unattractive, for all of her "accomplish'd" qualities) throws her efforts into question.

Posted by Katherine Mullins at 9:05 AM

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