

## Extracts from James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (1766)

### From Sermon IV: On Female Virtue

When entertainment is made the vehicle of instruction, nothing surely can be more harmless, agreeable, or useful. To prohibit young minds the perusal of any writings, where wisdom addresses the affections in the language of the imagination, may be sometimes well meant, but must be always injudicious. Some such writings undoubtedly there are; the offspring of real genius enlightened by knowledge of the world, and prompted, it is to be hoped, by zeal for the improvement of youth.

Happy indeed, beyond the vulgar story-telling 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; where, to say no more, distress occasioned often by indiscretions, consistent with many degrees of worth, yet clouding it for the time, is worked up into a storm, such as to call forth the principles of fortitude and wisdom, confirming and brightening them by that exertion; till at length the bursting tempest is totally, or in a great measure dispelled, so that the hitherto suspended and agitated reader is either relieved entirely, and delighted even to transport, or has left upon his mind at the conclusion a mixture of virtuous sadness, which serves to fasten the moral deeper, and to produce an unusual sobriety in all his passions.

Amongst the few works of this kind which I have seen, I cannot but look on those of Mr. Richardson<sup>1</sup> as well entitled to the first rank; an author, of whom an indisputable judge has with equal truth and energy pronounced, "that he taught the passions to move at the command of reason:" I will venture to add, an author, to whom your sex are under singular obligations for his uncommon attention to their 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), best known for his epistolary novels *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady* (1748), and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753).

Beside the beautiful productions of that incomparable pen, there seem to me to be very few, in the style of 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 so shameful, in their tendency so 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. But can it be true—say, ye chaste stars, that with innumerable eyes inspect the midnight behaviour of mortals—can it be true, that any young woman, pretending to decency, should endure for a moment to look on this infernal brood of futility and lewdness?

Nor do we condemn those writings only, that, with an effrontery which defies the laws of God and man, 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. 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!

In the Old Romance the passion appeared with all its enthusiasm. But then it was the enthusiasm of honour; for love and honour were there the same. The men were sincere, magnanimous, and noble; the women were patterns of chastity, dignity, and affection. They were only to be won by real heroes; and this title was founded in protecting, not in betraying, the sex. The proper merit with them consisted in the display of disinterested goodness, undaunted fortitude, and unalterable fidelity. The turn of those books was influenced by the genius of the times in which they were composed; as that, on the other hand, was nourished by them. The characters they drew were, no doubt, often heightened beyond nature; and the incidents they related, it is certain, were commonly blended with the most ridiculous extravagance. At present, however, I believe they may be read with perfect safety, if indeed there be any who choose to look into them.

The times in which we live are in no danger of adopting a system of romantic virtue. 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 flints that idle, youthful, unprofitable passion, which has for its object personal attractions, in preference to all the wealth in the world. With the successful endeavours of those profoundly politic parents, the levity of dissipation, the vanity of parade, and the fury of gaming, now so prevalent, have concurred to cure completely in the fashionable of both sexes any tendency to mutual fondness.

## From Sermon V: On Female Virtue, Friendship, and Conversation

Having mentioned Wit, let me proceed to warn you against the affectation and the abuse of it. Here our text from the Colossians comes in with propriety, "Let your Speech be always with Grace, seasoned with Salt."<sup>2</sup> These remarkable words were addressed to christians in general. They are considered by the best commentators, as an exhortation to that kind of converse, which, both for matter and manner, shall appear most graceful, and prove most acceptable; being tempered by courteousness and modesty, seasoned with wisdom and discretion, that like salt will serve at the same instant, to prevent its corruption and heighten its flavour. How beautiful this precept in itself! How useful and pleasing in the practice! How peculiarly fit to be practised by you, my female friends, on the turn of whose conversation and deportment so much depends to yourselves, and all about you! From what I have now to offer, it will be found likewise to come, with advantage, in aid of our leading doctrine; since there are not perhaps many worse foes to that Sobriety of spirit, which we would still inculcate, than the abuse and affectation already mentioned.

It is not my design to gather up, if I could, the profusion of flowers that have been scattered by innumerable hands on this tempting theme; and by which those very hands have, in their own case, shown how difficult it is to resist the temptation. I would only observe, that the dangerous talent in question has been well compared to the dancing of a meteor, that blazes, allures, and misleads. Most certainly it alone can never be a steady light; and too probably it is often a fatal one. Of those who have resigned themselves to its guidance, how few has it not betrayed into great indiscretions at least, by inflaming their thirst of applause; by rendering them little nice in their choice of company; by seducing them into strokes of satire, too offensive to the persons against whom they were levelled, not to be repelled upon the authors with full vengeance and finally, by making them, in consequence of that heat which produces, and that vanity which fosters it, forgetful of those cool and moderate rules that ought to regulate their conduct!

A very few there may have been endowed with judgment and temper sufficient to restrain them from indulging "the rash dexterity of wit," and to direct it to purposes equally agreeable and beneficial. But one thing is certain, that witty men for the most part have had few friends, though many admirers. Their conversation has been courted, while their abilities have been feared, or their characters hated, or both. In truth the last have seldom merited affection, even when the first have excited esteem. Sometimes their hearts have been so bad, as at length to bring their heads into disgrace. At any rate, the faculty termed Wit is commonly looked upon with a suspicious eye, as a two-edged sword, from which not even the sacredness of friendship can secure. It is especially, I think, dreaded in women. In a Mrs. Howe, I dare say, it was not. To great brilliancy of imagination that female angel joined yet greater goodness of disposition; and never wrote, nor, as I have been told, was ever supposed to have said, in her whole life, an ill-natured, or even an indelicate thing. Of

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians, 4:6.*

such a woman, with all her talents, none could be afraid. In her company, it must have been impossible not to feel respect; but then it would be like that, which the pious man entertains for a ministering spirit from heaven, a respect full of confidence and joy. If aught on earth can present the image of celestial excellence in its softest array, it is surely an accomplished Woman, in whom purity and meekness, intelligence and modesty, mingle their charms. But when I speak on this subject, need I tell you, that men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a witty female?

You will probably tell me, they were afraid of being outshone; and some of them perhaps might be so. But I am apt to believe, that many of them acted on different motives. Men who understand the science of domestic happiness, know that its very first principle is ease. Of that indeed we grow fonder, in whatever condition, as we advance in life, and as the heat of youth abates. But we cannot be easy, where we are not safe. We are never safe in the company of a critic; and almost every wit is a critic by profession. In such company we are not at liberty to unbend ourselves. All must be the straining of study, or the anxiety of apprehension: how painful! Where the heart may not expand and open itself with freedom, farewell to real friendship, farewell to convivial delight! But to suffer this restraint at home, what misery! From the brandishings of wit in the hand of ill-nature, of imperious passion, or of unbounded vanity, who would not flee? But when that weapon is pointed at a husband, is it to be wondered if from his own house he takes shelter in the tavern? He sought a soft friend; he expected to be happy in a reasonable companion. He has found a perpetual satirist, or a self-sufficient prattler. How have I pitied such a man, when I have seen him in continual fear on his own account, and that of his friends, and for the poor lady herself; lest, in the run of her discourse, she should be guilty of some petulance, or some indiscretion that would expose her and hurt them all! But take the matter at the best; there is still all the difference in the world between the entertainer of an evening, and a partner for life. Of the latter a sober mind, steady attachment, and gentle manners, joined to a good understanding, will ever be the chief recommendations; whereas the qualities that sparkle will be often sufficient for the former.

As to the affectation of wit, one can hardly say, whether it be most ridiculous or hurtful. The abuse of it, which we have been just considering, we are sometimes, perhaps too often, inclined to forgive, for the sake of that amusement which in spite of all the improprieties mentioned, it yet affords. The other is universally contemptible and odious. Who is not shocked by the flippant impertinence of a self-conceited woman, that wants to dazzle by the supposed superiority of her powers? If you, my fair ones, have knowledge and capacity; let it be seen, by your not affecting to show them, that you have something much more valuable, humility and wisdom.