Medieval Jane Austen: A Response to Fritz Kemmler

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This response is a contribution to the debate on "'Pride' in Byte and 'Prejudice' in Bits: A Medievalist's Perspective on Jane Austen's Novel." (https://www.connotations.de/debate/medievalists-perspective-austens-pride-and-prejudice/). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

In this essay, I respond to Fritz Kemmler's provocative suggestion that Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is indebted to medieval Christian traditions of moral instruction, particularly the seven deadly sins and their corresponding virtues. A growing number of scholars have recently begun to acknowledge Austen's engagement with the medieval past, and I interpret Kemmler's work as an important contribution to this scholarly trend. My response to Kemmler is twofold. First, I propose that we identify specific survivals of the medieval paradigm of sin and virtue in the eighteenth century and suggest Samuel Johnson, one of Austen's favorite writers, as someone who extends and develops it. Second, I maintain that acknowledging Austen's acquaintance with medieval moral traditions may help us understand the religious dynamics of her other novels, particularly *Sense and Sensibility*, where a conversion from pride to humility is central to the work.

Once upon a time, scholars maintained that Jane Austen does not engage religion in her works.[1] This view is understandable. Austen's novels are not openly didactic, like those of the Evangelical writer Hannah

More, which she disliked.[2] As a good eighteenth-century Anglican, she also had a horror of religious enthusiasm. Memories of the chaos unleashed in England in the seventeenth century by those who claimed divine inspiration loomed large over Austen's age; a fear of seeming too warm in one's spiritual devotions or too certain of the rightness of one's own spiritual impulses was bred deeply into her cultural DNA. Consequently, Austen's novels do not openly address Biblical themes and are in fact notable for the scarcity of Biblical allusions in comparison with works by contemporary authors. But reticence about religion does not imply its absence or insignificance. A host of recent studies have demonstrated Austen's deep engagement with religion and have thereby broadened our understanding of the novels.[3] Fritz Kemmler's essay, "'Pride' in Byte and 'Prejudice' in Bits: A Medievalist's Perspective on Jane Austen's Novel," is a worthy contribution to this scholarly trend.

In this essay, Kemmler argues that Austen's treatment of "pride and prejudice" in her novel of 1813 owes something to medieval Christian traditions of "moral instruction and spiritual guidance" illustrated in the seven deadly sins and their corresponding virtues or "remedies" (47). Kemmler employs the latest *modern* technology to recover this *medieval* context. He uses a computer program to generate a word list for *Pride and Prejudice* that allows him not only to determine how many times the words "pride" and "prejudice" (in various forms) appear in the novel, but also in what contexts and in relation to which characters. His list is sensitive to Austen's reliance on free indirect discourse; it takes into account when words appear in direct speech of the characters or in general narration. Analysis of the list, according to Kemmler, reveals that Austen's use of "pride," "prejudice," and related ethical terms mirrors that of medieval moral treatises like Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Parson's Tale," Thomas Chobham's *Summa Confessorum*, and Robert Mannyng's *Handling Synne*. In these manuals, pride is the root of all other sins, and humility is its remedy. Deliberately and clearly, Kemmler demonstrates Austen's fidelity to medieval tradition in dissecting a range of prideful behaviors and, in Elizabeth Bennet and Mr.

Darcy, depicting the development of proper repentance and humility. Kemmler implies that the authors of the medieval treatises would consider Austen a kindred spirit, her moral universe similar to their own.

Kemmler makes an excellent case for a medieval Jane Austen, for an author who finds inspiration in the venerable traditions of the past. Many scholars today want to rescue Austen from the past, to see her as a revolutionary who would be more at home in our world than in her own. One has to look no further than Helena Kelly's *Jane Austen: The Secret Radical* (2016) for the most recent statement of this position, one that has been made numerous times since Claudia Johnson did so in her influential *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988). Kemmler maintains that Jane Austen, the daughter and sister of Anglican clergymen, was conversant with Christian moral philosophy as it was developed in the Middle Ages and extended by Renaissance theologians and humanists. By ignoring or minimizing the medieval context of her work, he suggests, we risk misunderstanding it.

There is much to be said for reading Austen in a medieval perspective. She almost certainly knew Chaucer, for example. A copy of the 1602 edition of Chaucer's works was in her brother's library at Godmersham Park; she may have known that volume but could also have encountered *The Canterbury Tales* and other works in new editions of Chaucer that were published in 1721 and 1775 as well as anthologies of English poetry that appeared frequently in the later decades of the eighteenth century.[4] Jocelyn Harris has demonstrated the influence of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" on *Persuasion*, and Ellen E. Martin suggests that the Wife's ripping of pages from her husband's "book of wykked wyves" was in Austen's mind when she included a similar book desecration in her dramatization of Samuel Richardson's novel *Sir Charles Grandison*. Austen seems to have known Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, probably through Chaucer's translation of it; Ethan K. Smilie has argued that Boethius animates the exploration of loss and sorrow in *Persuasion*. I have recently suggested that Austen draws on medieval ecclesiastical satire in depicting numerous worldly clergymen.[5]

Turning scholarly attention to Austen's relationship with medieval literature and religion seems to be a productive, rewarding endeavor.

I would like to address one question that arises from Kemmler's essay and point to an aspect of *Sense and Sensibility* that assumes new richness in light of Kemmler's assertions. First, how did Jane Austen encounter the "mediaeval tradition of moral instruction and spiritual guidance" (60)? Kemmler acknowledges that "the eighteenth-century context for 'pride and prejudice' has been studied in some depth, whereas the mediaeval context has been largely neglected" (40). In drawing a distinction between eighteenth-century and medieval contexts, he seems to minimize the overlap. Certainly, there is an eighteenth-century strand of moral speculation that depends for inspiration on Aristotle rather than Christianity. Gilbert Ryle, who argued that "Jane Austen's moral system was a secular, Aristotelian ethic-cum-aesthetic," for instance, indicates the powerful influence of this tradition (118). But there were many eighteenth-century writers who subscribed to a traditional Christian understanding of sin and virtue, who were as alive to the insidiousness of pride, and to its corresponding remedy, as the medieval writers whom Kemmler mentions.

To understand the influence of the medieval moral paradigm on Jane Austen's novels, we must consider those in the eighteenth century who extend and develop this paradigm. We should turn, for instance, to one of Austen's favorite authors, Samuel Johnson.[6] Few in the eighteenth century were as well-versed in the history of Christian moral speculation as Johnson. He owned volumes of Augustine and Aquinas as well as works by Christian humanists like Erasmus, and his writings resonate with their concerns.[7] Johnson examines pride and its consequences everywhere in his works, from *The Vanity of Human Wishes* to *Rasselas* to the essays of *The Rambler* and *The Idler*, but reading Kemmler's essay made me think especially of his sermons. While not a clergyman himself, Johnson wrote sermons for others; by his own account, he wrote forty, twenty-eight of which have definitively been proven to be his (Hagstrum xxi, xix). The Biblical text for his Sixth Sermon is Proverbs 11:2: "When pride cometh, then cometh shame, but with the lowly is

wisdom." Johnson explores the nature of pride, the various motivations for it, and its cure in humility in a manner resembling "The Parson's Tale" and other medieval sources. Johnson's sermon, for instance, acknowledges the priority and pervasiveness of pride. "Pride is a corruption that seems almost originally ingrafted in our nature," he declares, and it appears everywhere and in everyone: "pride is the native of every country, infects every climate, and corrupts every nation. It ranges equally through the gardens of the east, and the desarts [sic] of the south, and reigns no less in the cavern of the savage, than in the palace of the epicure" (66). He defines pride as "an immoderate degree of self-esteem, or an over-value set upon a man by himself [...]" (67) and, with characteristic Johnsonian sensitivity to the human capacity for self-delusion, explores how even its seemingly laudable forms, pride of knowledge and pride of virtue, involve negative consequences. Declaring that "every argument against any vice is equally an argument in favour of the contrary virtue," the work ends with an exhortation to the "amiableness and excellence of humility," and points the auditor to the example of Christ, whose life "was one continued exercise of humility" (73).

Johnson wrote this sermon for his friend Dr. John Taylor, prebendary of St. Margaret's, Westminster, and, along with twenty-seven others, it was published in 1788 in *Sermons for Different Subjects, Left for Publication by John Taylor, LL. D.* (see Hagstrum xx). Johnson's name appears nowhere in the volume, but Johnson's friends and the general public quickly recognized the works as his (Hagstrum xxvii). Jane Austen may have read this sermon and known it was composed by Johnson; its insight into how pride of virtue "is generally accompanied by great uncharitableness, and severe censures of others," for example, seems perfectly descriptive of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Collins, whose confidence in his own superiority leads him to advise Mr. Bennet to disown his daughter for eloping with Mr. Wickham (72). But whether she read the sermon or not is less important than the fact that Johnson's work is a survival, however attenuated, of the "sin and virtue" paradigm in the eighteenth century; it gives us a meaningful foundation for assessing

how Austen knew the paradigm and came to pair particular sins and virtues in her novels.

Kemmler's analysis of the language of sin and virtue in *Pride and Prejudice* offers a pattern for reading Austen's other novels. *Sense and Sensibility*, as Laura Mooneyham White correctly observes, contains "the most sustained language of religious feeling" (61) of any of the novels, so it seems ripe for analysis *a la* Kemmler. Austen presents Marianne Dashwood's devotion to the cult of sensibility as a species of religious enthusiasm or spiritual pride. Marianne believes that her exalted perceptions and elevated feelings separate her from the common herd; her usual response to the company of unenlightened souls is simply to walk out of the room! Her disappointment over the failed romance with Willoughby leads her to illness and the brink of death. This physical sickness prompts a spiritual conversion; "contrition," "amendment," and "atonement" appear throughout the final pages of the novel as she and her sister Elinor discuss her change of heart. Marianne awakens from her prideful dreams, acknowledges the damage that her "hardened" heart has done to others, and resolves to lead a life "regulated […] and checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment" (347). "I shall now live solely for my family," she tells her sister Elinor, and vows that

> If I do mix in other society it will only be to shew that my spirit is **humbled**, my heart amended, and that I can practice the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness and forbearance. (347; added emphasis)

Among the devotional practices that Marianne mentions as a product of her repentance is a distinctly medieval one: pilgrimage (see White 120).

> "When […] I have recovered my strength," said she, "we will take long walks together every day. We will walk to the farm at the edge of the Down, and see how the children go on; we will walk to Sir John's new plantations at Barton-Cross, and the Abbeyland; and we will often go to the old ruins of the Priory, and try to trace its foundations as far as we are told they once reached." (343)

Marianne is of course drawn to the ruined abbey in part for its picturesque qualities, but, in the context of her conversion, we should not underestimate the spiritual significance of her impulse. As with so many medieval pilgrims, Marianne hopes a visit to a sacred place—whose "foundations" have not been effaced—will provide spiritual and physical healing and signify her renewed connection to God. Austen's association of conversion and pilgrimage is unusual. Does it indicate some dim awareness of past forms of moral and spiritual transformation, of penitential practices that Chaucer, Chobham, and Mannyng would have recognized as efficacious? Kemmler's provocative suggestion that Jane Austen is an heir of the medieval moral tradition encourages us to look with fresh eyes at *Sense and Sensibility* and the other novels, to be open to considering previously unacknowledged continuities between her art and the medieval past.

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NOTES

[1]Laurence Lerner, for instance, maintained that "Jane Austen the novelist did not believe in God because God is totally absent from her work" (23). G. K. Chesterton considered Austen "supremely irreligious" and characterized her as an author whose "very virtues glitter with the cold sunlight of the great secular epoch between mediaeval and modern mysticism" (444).

[2]Austen told her sister Cassandra that she was prepared to dislike More's famous *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809): "You have by no means raised my curiosity after Caleb [sic]; My disinclination for it before was affected, but now it is real; I do not like the Evangelicals" (Austen, *Letters* 177).

[3]See, for example, Giffin; and White.

[4]See Urry; and Tyrwhitt. For specifics concerning the Chaucer volume, see the *Reading with Austen* (https://www.readingwithausten.com/) website.

[5]See my article, "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Jane Austen's Clergymen and their Literary Ancestors," forthcoming in *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*.

[6]Austen referred to "my dear Dr. Johnson" in one of her letters (Austen 126), and her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh remarked that "[a]mongst her favourite writers, Johnson in prose, Crabbe in verse, and Cowper in both, stood high" (71).

[7]See Greene's catalog of Johnson's library. Johnson also knew Chaucer well and owned a copy of the 1721 edition of his works. Chaucer provided one direct source for Johnson's knowledge of the seven deadly sins (see Greene 48).

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