Pride and Pastiche: Humor and Intertextual Parody in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*  

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I. Introduction

Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* came out in 1996, and some two decades later its scholarly treatment has remained about as thin as the novel’s protagonist endeavors to be. *BJD* criticism has ranged from superficial to a small but hopeful number of instructive readings, and might be usefully parsed into four schools. The first is more fan service than criticism, largely gushing over ‘how hot Mark Darcy/Colin Firth is.’ The second interrogates its disreputable genre affiliation. Part of the difficulty in establishing a critical context for *BJD* is that whether it deserves to be seriously read at all is contested, with some calling it little more than a “decidedly middlebrow” romance reminiscent of pulp bodice-rippers (Harrison 123). The pejorative *chick* lit has clung to the novel, with criticism that the genre’s books are as ephemerally consumable and disposable as the shoes and handbags on their covers (Ferriss, *Working Girls* 177). Maureen Dowd calls the type “all chick and no lit” (qtd. in Davis-Kahl 19), and others crudely dismiss its iterations as *bonkbusters* (Hurst 459), though some readings do note its fertile proliferation into various cultural forms, such as hen lit (for older females), *Chica lit* (for Latinas), *Sistah lit* (for African-Americans), and *church lit* (for Christian evangelicals) (Ferriss, “Doubleness” 5-6).

More divisive has been *BJD*’s treatment in feminist criticism, which has assessed the novel vis-à-vis its portrayal of Bridget as empowering/hindering women’s agency. In comically depicting Bridget as a hapless, boy-crazy bumbler, whose side is Fielding on? Arrayed against her are those who find the novel “problematic, particularly from a feminist point of view” (Marsh 52). Maddison and Storr give perhaps the harshest account in censuring the characters’ “neo-liberal sneer” (4) at women’s

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and racial issues, condemning the story’s “whiteness” (5) and reading its faux-postmodernism as a trick to take feminist gains for granted while insisting “that they are ultimately less important than attracting a man” (14). Bridget seems suspect of such a charge in declaring that “there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism” (BJD 20). Yet on Bridget’s side are those who support her sex-positivity—also derided as “do-me feminism” (Genz 98)—and readings which argue that benign critiques of feminism provide healthy introspection while keeping it relevant (Bach 326). Margaret Atwood notes the problem that depicting bad females in literature appears ‘unfeminist’ but is necessary if women are to be portrayed realistically (qtd. in Bach 318). Fielding herself is unrepentant, concluding that women “haven’t got very far at being equal” (qtd. in Gamble 66) if they cannot laugh at their human imperfections.

BJD makes no claim to being an ideological treatise, nor is it obligated to be one. Moreover, a limitation in such criticism is that it tends to take an instrumental view of BJD, seeing it as a case study from which to mine or explicate feminist concepts rather than analyzing the text in its own right. The fourth category, of readings focusing on the novel’s intertextuality, is perhaps a more purely literary one, though at the cost of interpreting BJD within an interdependent matrix of sources rather than an independent textual unit. BJD rather frankly follows the wider plot structure of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, and Fielding has humorously admitted to ‘stealing’ Austen’s plot, dryly confessing that “I thought that she wouldn’t mind and anyway, she’s dead” (qtd. in Ferriss, “Doubleness” 71). Much analysis of BJD’s intertextuality has great fun parsing the recurring references to P&P (both male leads are named Darcy; Bridget wants to do a story on the P&P actors (248); in the movie Bridget works for Pemberley Press) and Fielding plays with breaking the fourth wall by having Bridget find it “pretty ridiculous to be called Mr. Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party” (13). Later she moons over the 1995 BBC version of P&P, commenting that Mr. Darcy is more attractive than Mark Darcy while granting that “being imaginary was a disadvantage” (247), as Fielding winks to the reader that Bridget does not see her own equivalent fictionality (Francus).

Yet Austen in turn played with self-referential allusion, having Mr. Collins protest that “he never read novels” (P&P 60) and instead choose the maximally tedious James Fordyce, a sermon-writer who railed against romances (Simons 470). Austen’s family were, in her words, “great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so” (qtd. in Le Faye 26, in Murphy 22),