

Northanger Abbey

J. Austen

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This is the first written of Austen's published novels, although along with *Persuasions*, it was published a year after her death. and as such it is written as a spoof on the Gothic novels so popular at the time. In true 18th century style, she does not take the writing of the novel that seriously, but allows it to be part of a larger story, namely that of writing the novel itself, in the kind of playful meta-fiction so popular at the time, as witnessed by say *Tristram Shandy*. Thus she does as an author step in, deliberately heavy-handedly reminding the reader that this is all pretense, not serious at all. A flippancy, which is initially somewhat off-putting.

Her heroine, or as we would say nowadays, her anti-heroine, is a young silly girl of comfortable but far from spectacular circumstances. She is an older child in a rather large brew and is sent to Bath chaperoned by a wealthy and childless neighbouring couple. The purpose to the visit in Bath is to pick up a husband. Not to put too fine a point on it, it is a veritable meat market. Catherine, the name of the young heroine, has in her late teens turned into a more than passable beauty. Young girls do that at that time of age, if they ever. So at Bath you are paraded before the eyes of prospective suitors, at something appropriately enough called the Pump-room (but the pump referred to must be the one pertaining to pump up the healthy water, but who cares about water if you are young and nimble?) The first step in the process is a pleasant conversation, the second is a dance. Not to know anyone at the place is a definite disadvantage. Luckily Mrs Allen, this being the name of the neighbouring lady who so kindly have brought her along as a companion, meets a certain Mrs Thorpe, who is there with her daughters, and is soon joined by her son, who by pure coincidence is befriended by James, the older brother of Catherine. They are all there, and there is a nucleus of a party. In fact Catherine is introduced to an even sillier girl, a certain Isabelle, who is far more accomplished in her silliness, having far more experience of it. They soon, one would almost say with undue haste, become bosom-friends, Isabelle leading the way. Her brother takes a fancy to Catherine, or at least thinks so, while Isabelle connects with her brother. They form a close-knit group fused by bourgeoning friendship and undeniable ties of blood. But Catherine is not too happy being part of the group, very soon she finds the brother John of Isabelle, quite a bore, with nothing much to speak of than his horses and carriage and all that. And he is a reckless driver of his beasts as well. Instead her attention is captivated by a certain young man- by name of Henry Tilney, whose acquaintance she makes one of the first days. She is rather sad not to see him after that initial meeting, and thus overjoyed when he shortly thereafter resurfaces, now with a pretty lady at his side, whom Catherine decided must be his sister. Her guess turns out to be right, and she is very eager to cultivate her acquaintance, only to have her efforts foiled by John Thorpe by means of rude deceptions. She does however manage to wrangle out of her brother's and friend's entreaties and get to have some quality time with her new friends. Nevertheless her friendship with Isabelle

deepens, or at least continues, at the convenience of the latter. Now, things develop, interestingly. James, her brother makes a proposal to Isabelle, and when it is given his parental blessing, he is overjoyed. Isabelle on the other hand is somewhat disappointed that the amount of money her future father-in-law is able to fix on his son, is a more modest one than she had expected. Meanwhile she is made court to by Captain Tilney, the elder brother of Henry Tilney, who makes a short visit to Bath. Do we need to add that John Thorpe in his boundless conceit believes that Catherine is in love with him, or at least should be? On top of this their father General Tilney, is also present. A most forbidding character, inspiring appropriate awe. And somewhat surprisingly acquainted with the bore Thorpe. One would of course expect them to move in different circles in view of their difference in age and social status.

The growing intimacy between Catherine and her friends is also encouraged by their father, this august figure who bestows on her a flood of civilities and solicitations, which almost overawes her. It culminates in an invitation to the ancestral home - Northanger Abbey, of indefinite duration. This has a multitude of attractions to our heroine. Besides being in company of her friends, be it that Henry needs from time to time to reside at his nearby curate, the intrigues of a gothic setting, fires the imagination of Catherine. Henry, who after all are a few years older, senses this and teases her affectionately with tales of what will expect her when admitted to the premises. And indeed, Catherine endows the setting with all the fervid embellishments her imagination, fed on cheap Gothic novels, is able to furnish her with. The exactness of the father, the general, with his insistence on punctuality and seemingly indifference to his wife, dead as of nine years, makes her believe that he has perhaps murdered his wife, and if not, maybe hiding her in the Abbey in some dark dungeon. As is often observed, or at least should be, there is no dearth of evidence for any hypothesis you may entertain (in other contexts, this is known as persecution mania). So she decides to find out and confirm her conjectures by now turned convictions. She is caught in the act by Henry on a surprise return visit, and to her mortification, her suspicions are brought out in the open, due to her innocence. She is admonished for ever entertaining such conceptions as to the villainy of their father, but rather than cooling the bond between them, it seems to strengthen it, as common secrets tend to do.

During her visit she receives two letters. All the time she is eagerly longing for some sign of life from her dear friend Isabella, who on her departure had promised to write. Fat chance. The letter is from her brother that informs her that the engagement with Isabella is broken off, that she instead has engaged herself to Captain Tilney, the brother of her hosts. She is devastated. Her worries have after all come true. And what inconstancy on the part of her friend. The situation is delicate of course, due to the connection with the Captain, whom she hopes never to encounter at Northanger, but of course innocent and trusting as she is, she cannot but reveal the contents of the letter to her friends, even to the point of letting them read it. Some time after she gets a lengthy letter from Isabella herself, where she makes amends for not having written before, assuring her that she has ever since her departure put pen to paper every morning, without being able to fulfill her mission. The reason for her writing is obvious enough, she has been dumped by the Captain, and is now pining for her former lover, entreating Catherine to interfere on her behalf. Catherine, wisely enough, does not deign to answer this missive, but sees through

it (unlike the reader eager for a reconciliation of the two bosom friends?) as superficial artifice. But the real shock is still to occur.

One day a carriage arrives during the absence of the general (a fact that has brought greta relief to Catherine). Our heroine steels for the worst expecting it to be the older brother. But no, after a prolonged absence Eleanor (so is the name of miss Tilney by the way) returns with awful intelligence. It is her father unexpectedly returning in the worst of moods. But that is just the beginning indeed. Not only is the entire family to depart for a visit to a distant place, but our heroine is to be turned out of the house without ceremony the first thing tomorrow morning, without even the benefit of breakfast. Catherine is dumbfounded. How could she have incurred the extreme displeasure of the general, he who until now had been so civil and solicitous? Had he not during their recent visit to the curates mansion, openly hinted at her future status as his future daughter-in-law? Had not her friend Eleanor supplied her with some ready cash, she would have been stranded midway, with no means of getting home to her village outside Salisbury.

At home after such an extended absence she receives the consolation of family which is of course due to her. But contrary to the expectations of her mother she does not bounce out of it but her sorrows of dejections remain with her. Eventually Henry Tilney comes to her rescue, makes a proposal of marriage and supplies the explanation of his fathers erratic behavior. It is prosaic enough. In Bath he had been informed by John Thorpe that Catherine was a lady of consequence, that her family was rich, and besides that she was the favorite of wealthy childless neighbours, sure to bestow her handsomely after their demise. Thorpe, believing himself to have successful designs on our heroine, only wanted to brag. The General smelling a very good match to be struck, consequently went out of his way to make it happen. But during his most recent visit to London, he bumped into Thorpe again, who now, disappointed by the refusal of his court, now made a reverse exaggeration. Not only pointing out the largeness of the breed, something he had kept a secret before, but also their dire circumstances, and their reputation as fortune seekers. As willing to swallow the first bait, as readily he was inclined to swallow the second with predictable consequences.

Now in the end everybody get each other. Miss Tilney marries a Vice Count, much to the immense pleasure of her father, whose heart softens. This suitor, incidentally, has never been mentioned before, but an author is in the position of a simple conjurer, able to command any kind of shape of a rabbit out of a hat. The proper situation of Catherine is explained to him, and after some hesitance, one would surmise, eventually gives his assent to his sons choice of bride, an assent which was the prerequisite of Catherine's parents'. As the author comments: the obstacles thrown by the general may have been fortunate, deepening the bonds between the two lovers. Besides marrying within twelve months of setting eyes on each other, there really is little for the to complain about. Now what would be more auspicious than a man of twenty-six setting out with a wife of eighteen?

Happy ending, as is the custom of the time. Yet, in spite of this, Austen is made to keep up suspense, and this being no mean feat after all. Suspense is not a matter of a tightly logical plot to unravel, as to logic and probability, there is much to fault Austen, but that is completely beside the point. What matters in fiction is not plausible realism as much as the suspension of judgement. As Aristotle remarked, there lies the secret of

good fiction. Suspense only works, if anytime, at a first reading. Surely anything as vulgar as providing suspense would not have accorded Austen such a classic status. There is fine writing indeed, characterized by a combination of economy and precision, which is a pure delight to partake of. Furthermore, she is funny, her wit is legendary, as is her sharpness of eye and tongue. Add to that the inevitable charm of partaking of life of two hundred years ago, a stretch of time, with twice the comport of a mere century. On one hand we learn that human nature has not changed, that people are just the same then as they were two centuries ago, only the circumstances are somewhat changed, but that in the light of human nature is a trifle, only allowing a different direction of the lightening. The same silliness pervaded young women then as it does now. The same propensity to flirt, to adore fashion. The man of today may be in love with his car, his forefather brought exactly the same sentiments to his carriage and horse. This comparison of the early 19th century with the early 21st is of course further illuminated by the modernity of Austen. Save from the occasional strange spelling, there is little in her idiom, apart from elegance, that differs from that of today. This removes many a stumble block and accidental obscuration. One wonders whether there is any development in the art of writing, definitely not in the use of language. But her modernism goes deeper than just her simple and supple command of words, it is something in her attitude that brings her right into our time. It is a useful remainder about the constancy of human nature, the basic foundation for the interest in history, and by implication the timeless novel.

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