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JANE AUSTEN AND THE BLISSFUL AMNESIA IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

“Catherine was heartily ashamed of her ignorance. A misplaced shame... A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.” (*Northanger Abbey*, 115)

Thus Jane Austen’s ironic wit at its sharpest, one might point out – after all, this novel ranks among satirical attacks directed at silly, indiscriminate readers of the popular Gothic fiction – the major bulk of which constituted an affront to both common sense and literary taste. Needless to say, the ultimate purpose of any satire is to inform, correct, straighten and cure by whichever means necessary – both heroine and the reader (as her natural companion and co-receiver of authorial instruction) must therefore learn to value knowledge and suffer the humiliation of being found ignorant.

Jane Austen regarded herself as a disciple to Fanny Burney, one of the founding mothers of domestic novel. The genre concerned itself with exploring the narrative and moral potential of “a young lady’s entrance into the world”¹ by tracing the following sequence of events: an inexperienced teenage girl of precarious social position is guilty of youthful errors of judgment which result in the ground shaking under her innocent feet. However, she resumes balance by grasping a helping hand of a well-meaning, well-informed friend. Ideally, though not necessarily, this friendly creature might turn out a single gentleman of appropriate age who, as the end of the book draws near, forms a decision to offer his hand to the lady in a different metaphorical context.

The categories of mentor and suitor may coincide or not, nevertheless, the rite of passage of a socially disadvantaged heroine must be concluded in marriage. As Austen somewhat wryly remarked in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813):

“Marriage is the only honourable provision for a lady of small fortune, however uncertain it may be of giving happiness.” (*Pride and Prejudice*, 163)

Catherine Morland, a simple girl of seventeen, is escorted to Bath, because it became abundantly clear to her friends and family that “if *adventures* will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad,” (7) in other words – unmarried women of slender means in the country have a tendency to stay unmarried and unprovided for, much to the chagrin of their families.

We might conclude that Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* (1818) to please the intelligent, discriminating readers as well as to poke fun at the voracious, gullible consumers of the Gothic novel, by highlighting the inherent stupidity of the genre. Catherine, who is partly uninformed (never learns anything substantial) and partly misinformed (chooses Mrs. Radcliffe as a guide and authority on life), tries to perceive the daylight, sane rational world as if it followed the same rules as the nightmarish realm of Gothic fantasy.

Catherine's frame of mind could be described as eager dread of something terrifying that might break through the thin crust of social conventions; she is prepared to be shocked and mortified at the slightest provocation. Henry Tilney, Jane Austen's satirical voice in human form, concocts a burlesque about Catherine's forthcoming stay in Northanger, compounded of Gothic clichés – gloomy passages, isolated apartment, doors with no lock to fit in, a violent storm, an old housekeeper Dorothy in charge and a hidden testament of some unfortunate victim named Matilda, who had suffered within the walls of the same building Catherine is about to enter. Henry's narrative of the horrors of his ancestral home is unmistakably satirical and is to be perceived as such. Catherine, nevertheless, seems more than ready to jump on conclusions of which we have a clear proof in her response to Henry's baiting:

“Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful! – This is just like a book! – But it cannot really happen to me. I am sure your housekeeper is not really Dorothy.” (167)

Catherine, whose mind is set on identification of the world of *Northanger Abbey* and that of Gothic novels – where General Tilney was cast in the role of the local Bluebeard – will accept no direct evidence to the contrary when it is offered. Having actively searched the place for an immured female or at least some written proof of her existence – Henry has, after all, bidden her to do so – Catherine does find a few sheets of paper, tucked away in an ancient chest. Much to her disappointment, these precious documents turn out to be old laundry bills.

Lamentably, Catherine's train of thought does not stop for trivial details and minor disappointments. Where growing discernment would be due, Catherine's mind, bent on folly, admits no ray of reason that might lead to enlightenment. It takes Henry's disgusted, unambiguous dismissal of Catherine's accusations, her fear of losing his affections (and a very forcible, though ambiguous speech on the merits of being English) to drive away the ghosts of the Gothic:

“What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you – Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies?” (212)

Catherine, humbled, tearful and miserable, eagerly clears the General of all suspicions, never again venturing critical judgments beyond “she did not believe him perfectly amiable.” (218)

It is Henry's appeal to Catherine's understanding and common sense that constitutes one of the major "controversies" of the book. Man cannot awaken a non-existent quality. If Catherine did become a person in possession of intelligence and understanding after this encounter, one would have to suspect Henry of wielding divine powers, as the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and human agents never mix.

To pull the tongue out of my cheek – finally and once for all: let us consider another aspect of innocence. The heroine perhaps only takes after her mother. Mrs. Morland was overheard to give her departing daughter a single, though unforgettable advice:

"I beg, Catherine, you will always wrap yourself up very warm about the throat, when you come from the Rooms at night." (9)

To the surprise of many, Catherine survives unscathed in the world whose dangers contain much more than tonsillitis, flu and headache. Austen set the story in the late 18th century, where a young girl's social life was indeed a manoeuvring business. Fanny Burney, for one, did a good job describing (or perhaps hinting at or circling around) some sordid aspects of the contemporary reality and the dangers implied in being female, pretty and unprotected even for a little while – which was considered issuing an invitation to be sexually harassed.²

What is more – Catherine not only survives, she survives blissfully uninformed. There follows an account of some potential threats or disappointments that elude her. She watches her friend Isabella flirt with an officer, never guessing the true nature of the spectacle everyone has gazed at. Concerning Catherine's immediate danger as the proper heroine: the world of Jane Austen happens to accommodate libertines, but not the unfaltering rakish kind in the vein of Lovelace or Willoughby – the authoress managed to transform the figures of danger into some kind of local fauna lurking in the background to be summoned only if needed. Truly, there must be some degree of disappointment, because Catherine's friend, her brother's fiancée Isabella turns out a scheming minx and a gold-digger – but as most of the incidents take place in Catherine's absence, it hurts much less. Catherine suffers an unexpected expulsion from Northanger and travels home unescorted for quite some time. As her journey passes, given the context, quite alarmingly, "with nothing to give alarm," (251) her family can be perhaps justified in describing the General's shocking behaviour merely as "not civil."³

The author of domestic novel is supposed to escort the heroine into adulthood and maturity. Austen must have decided to willfully ignore the basic rules of the genre by sending Catherine on a journey towards confusion, not understanding. Even her homecoming is presented to the reader in a flagrantly suspicious manner – as one of the most alienating experience of all. Suddenly, a gap opens up between a daughter and her parents as Mrs. Morland ascribes Catherine's unheard-of silence and discomfort at the loss of Henry's company to the lack of French bread at the breakfast table. This resonates with Mrs. Morland's earlier, equally farcical attempts at motherly care: always trying to solve a non-existent problem, to deal with factoids, not facts while cheerfully ignoring the strikingly obvious reality of

life in general, a young woman's life in particular. And this couple is what Jane Austen in the opening chapter proudly presents to the reader as model parents, paragons of reason and sensible behaviour! Mr. and Mrs. Morland calmly reconcile themselves to the idea of their daughter's engagement to a gentleman they have been acquainted to for a few minutes, to a gentleman whose parent father treated Catherine in much less than "amiable" fashion/manner. Given the undeniable experience of their son's hastily contrived engagement to Isabella Thorpe that came to an abrupt and disappointing end, one might expect that truly reasonable as well as considerate parents would hardly face with some composure the prospect of yet another mysterious child-in-law.

Without any doubt, this attitude is partly dictated by the Morland family self-preservation instinct, because – despite George Orwell's later arguments to the contrary – ignorance *is* strength after all.

Catherine never conceives a grown-up version of her dealings with General Tilney, nor does she experience awakening of her own power of discrimination – Henry's narcotizing presence prevents this. As it transpires, his carefully worded advice to Catherine "consult your own understanding." reads as "consult mine". Catherine has by this time learnt to respect his opinion against all odds, no matter what the case might be, and as Henry never acknowledges any misgivings as to his father's character or behaviour, Catherine blots out the truthful account of her experience and gives in to Henry-induced amnesia. This aspect of her nature is reminiscent of another blissfully forgetful character of Austen's making – Lady Bertram of Mansfield Park. However, this lady's privilege of not knowing anything at all owes a lot to insubstantial doses of opium.

Catherine ends up as uninformed as she might be, with her mind colonized by Henry's expansive personality, yet she is destined to enjoy "perfect happiness" (273). Jane Austen makes a point of informing the reader – in a suspiciously cheerful and wanton manner – of the link between Catherine's marriage and General Tilney's greedy plans: these entail the very much hoped-for demise of Catherine's rich childless patrons, the Allens.

The juxtaposition of an image of wedding bells and someone's death – which is presented as a matter for congratulation – is foisted on the unsuspecting readership without much warning. As soon as one disquieting detail is noticed, the power of retrospective logic illuminates many other disruptions within the narrative. D.W.Harding defined such implicitly condemning comments as aspects of "regulated hatred" (Harding 1998: 7) – a proof of social paranoia which made Jane Austen lose, though momentarily, control of her artistry throughout the narrative.

These ironic outbursts tend to form an undercurrent rather than a series of isolated incidents; a counternarrative that subverts the official (superficial) version of any Jane Austen story. And it is a truth universally acknowledged among academics that irony serves as a portal in the fabric of such "flawed" narrative, an opening that exists but for a moment to allow the reader into the rabbit-hole of interpretation.

One might suggest that Harding's "slips" should not be labelled as such, merely as a matter of catching the great narrator off her guard. Austen giving in to

romance blindly and unconditionally, that would indeed constitute a major “slip”. The fact of prevalent hostility and cynicism of her Juvenilia, the immediate predecessors of *Northanger Abbey*, is far too obvious to be open to a doubt. However, a capacity for demonstrative frankness could be hardly considered an enhancement to a Regency lady’s personal charms (should she ever become a published author) and Austen, given her upbringing and status, never vied for the vacant position of the “hyena in petticoats”⁴ – another Mary Wollstonecraft.

Ergo, Austen’s demonstrative acts of kindness towards Catherine Morland’s uninformed happiness read as a double-edged satiric bite. The general public had every reason to expect it was the danger of getting caught in a private, solipsistic world of Gothic fancy, what Austen meant to scrutinize and censure. The fact that Austen finally chose not to inform and perfect her heroine, though she was obliged to, and that she failed to instruct the omnivorous contemporary reader, creates quite a conundrum. Let us make the situation expertly worse and venture this suggestion: what if she asked her readers to *doublethink* – to read the text on its own terms while simultaneously reading it against the grain? I have already invoked the 20th century response twice by trotting out Orwell; shall I compound my transgressions by inviting Wolfgang Iser to have a word in? Indeed, Austen seems to anticipate response from the readers, perceiving them as her own (not the heroine’s) companions, fellow-artists and collaborators.

Re-reading *Northanger Abbey* requires anyone attempting at it to cut every connection easily made. This world is not logical, words may not be literal, happy endings blissful and reason victorious. Catherine’s instinct identified General Tilney as a Gothic monster. The outcome of the story quite surprisingly vindicates her instinct, not Henry’s reason, because, just like any beast, General Tilney was going to show his spots eventually. His mercenary plans and unprecedented cruelty aside, Austen drops other hints that must have made the contemporary readers wince:

“I have many pamphlets to finish,” said he to Catherine, “before I can close my eyes, and perhaps may be poring over the affairs of the nation for hours after you are asleep. Can either of us be more meekly employed? My eyes will be blinding for the good of others; and yours preparing by rest for future mischief.” (187)

According to Robert Hopkins, the General’s speech contains its own condemnation: it identified him as one of Henry’s “voluntary spies”, in other words: respectable members of a local community who were trusted with questioning arrested strangers and screening their documents for seditious statements. Henry’s remark is supposed to reflect the political reality of the 1790s and early 1800 (Hopkins even quotes a part of *Biographia Literaria* to support his argument: a similar, equally nightmarish “neighbourhood watch” once suspected Wordsworth and Coleridge of being French spies).⁵

To give another proof: the Tilneys and Catherine discuss a forthcoming Gothic novel during their stay in Bath. According to Catherine, “something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London.” (117) Henry feels obliged to placate his distressed sister, who misinterpreted Catherine’s remark and anticipated a real riot:

“My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your brain. The confusion there is scandalous. Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispice to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern – do you understand?” (118)

What follows – to reference an expert – might be considered a very accurate description of the Gordon Riots⁶. Elinor’s frightened response of a mind prepared for such atrocities to occur suggests these incidents formed a part of real life, real horror to come to terms with.

Jane Austen’s eye-openers keep cropping up to weave quite a different narrative fabric. Not everyone, however, feels ready to help Jane Austen will this counter-narrative into existence. Should this be your case, heed Henry’s advice and remember: the riot is only in your brain. It is just a harmless piece of text, ignorance is strength and Jane Austen was just another romantic female bent on happy endings.

Notes

- ¹ See Fanny Burney (1968: viii).
- ² Heroines recognize sexual harassment as a part of the social structure. See Simmons (1994: 43).
- ³ The General’s behaviour was sometimes considered even too shocking to be credible. See Butler (1975: 168–181).
- ⁴ A proper lady would never admit to admiring Wollstonecraft’s views as she was considered an immoral person, partly due to her husband’s tactlessly candid memoir of her. See Irvine (2005: 35).
- ⁵ See Hopkins (1978: 213).
- ⁶ See Hopkins (1978: 215).

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