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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
JANE AUSTEN

EDITED BY
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Pomona College
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RACHEL M. BROWNSTEIN

Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice

'For what do we live', Mr. Bennet exclaims to his favourite daughter late in *Pride and Prejudice*, 'but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?' (PP 364). The question is rhetorical – an answer, not a proper question – and Jane Austen's moral critics have sternly remonstrated with those who read it as the novelist's own answer. They explain it away as an epigram, only Mr. Bennet's philosophy, to be read ironically – by which they mean dismissively. And indeed Mr. Bennet is particularly obtuse, his wit ill-advised, when he says what he does while chuckling over the letter in which Mr. Collins reports that his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, disapproves of a marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy. Earlier in the novel, when her father read a letter from the same unctuous writer, Elizabeth was his pleased collaborator, asking, 'Can he be a sensible man, sir?', so Mr. Bennet could complacently reply, 'No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him' (64). Now Elizabeth is in love with Darcy; she has just refused to promise Lady Catherine de Bourgh not to marry him; she cannot possibly laugh at what her parent takes to be the absurd rumour of her impending marriage ('Mr. Darcy, who never looks at any woman but to see a blemish, and who probably never looked at *you* in his life!' [363]). When Mr. Bennet urges her to be 'diverted', not '*Missish*' (363–4), Elizabeth can only muster a strained smile and a nervous laugh. 'Her father had most cruelly mortified her, by what he said of Mr. Darcy's indifference, and she could do nothing but wonder at such a want of penetration, or fear that perhaps, instead of his seeing too *little*, she might have fancied too *much*' (364). Because it is glib as well as blind, her father's self-confidence threatens her own. When Elizabeth was first 'mortified' by Darcy's dismissal of her beauty ('tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*'), she forced a laugh and 'told the story ... with great spirit among her friends'; Mr. Bennet's daughter has, after all, 'a lively, playful disposition, which

delighted in any thing ridiculous' (12). But now she is worried that Darcy's own 'notions of dignity' might make him accept his aunt's 'ridiculous' arguments against her; and she is weaker than she was, living now neither to make sport for her neighbours nor to laugh at them, but more anxiously and narrowly for love.

The sympathetic reader is inclined to deplore Mr. Bennet's failure of penetration as Elizabeth does, and reflect that it is of a piece with what we (along with her) have come to recognize as his general insufficiency – as the lax, irresponsible father who invited disaster by allowing Lydia to follow the soldiers to Brighton; the overly caustic parent who embarrassed Mary in public to stop her singing ('You have delighted us long enough' [101]), and flippantly recommended Wickham to Elizabeth as 'a pleasant fellow, [who] would jilt you creditably' (138); the husband guilty of breaching decorum by exposing his wife to the contempt of her daughters. At this point in the story, one tends not to reflect (as one might) that he behaved more reasonably than not when he refused to lock up his wild daughter, silenced his doltish one, teased Elizabeth for a silly infatuation, and, years before, chose the detached pleasures of 'the true philosopher' over more foolish or vicious occupations when his pretty wife proved silly and 'all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown' (236). The courtship plot is approaching closure, and feeling seems more important than reason, especially as the dialogue of father and daughter in volume III follows a long passage in the free indirect style that gives us access to Elizabeth's thoughts. Mr. Bennet seems a flat, static comic character, merely the sum of his 'quick parts', in comparison to his daughter, who has depth and feeling as well as 'something more of quickness than her sisters' (5).

Nevertheless, undercut as it is by his character and circumstances, Mr. Bennet's remark is part of what *Pride and Prejudice* says and means. The epigram leaps off the page; like the narrator's happy formulation about Charlotte Lucas, that 'without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object' (122), it claims truth by thus leaping, and by moving with authority from the particular to the general. Rejecting great expectations (like Elizabeth's), it speaks to the portions of our brains that suspect romantic fiction – portions Jane Austen has cultivated. Its economical phrasing, its symmetry and sense, its philosophical detachment, are appealing not merely for their own sakes but because they are among this novel's values. Mr. Bennet's question reflects with striking accuracy the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which social interactions are the substance of life. Even the romantic plot begins as Elizabeth makes sport for Darcy, and she laughs at him in her turn; and towards the end, when Jane Bennet gets engaged, the narrator looks away

'body'. Novels are conflated with heroines, novelists praised for exhibiting 'the greatest powers of the mind . . . the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour' (38). Austen's defence of the gothic novels that Catherine and Isabella read and talk about, which this declaration conspicuously ignores, will also rest on their truth to – their imbrication in – human nature. Favouring individuals over abstractions, moving swiftly from the specific to the philosophical and general, the narrator's rhetoric is very like Mr. Bennet's.

Catherine's necessary hero is introduced to her altogether prosaically, as a dancing partner, by the master of ceremonies whose job it is to make such introductions. Romantic fiction is implicitly debunked by this event, also by the fact that Catherine likes Henry Tilney immediately, and that that makes him like her: far from being overwhelmed by her heroical qualities, 'a persuasion of her partiality for him [is] the only cause of giving her a serious thought' (243). The tropes of stock romance are parodied as, for instance, the requisite separation of the lovers is effected by Isabella Thorpe and her brother John, who physically restrain Catherine, each holding onto one arm, when she struggles to follow Henry and his sister down the street. Longing for the more elegant Tilneys, our heroine is entangled with the vulgar Thorpes, because she was so quickly taken up by the importunate, scheming Isabella – who as it turns out is being courted by her own brother James. The several brother-and-sister pairs, and Catherine's infatuation with both the sisters as well as one of the brothers, make for an ironically unerotic atmosphere in this romance: Henry's clever chaste comparison of marriage to a country dance reflects the novel's sassy sexlessness.

Named perhaps after Jane Austen's favourite brother, but perhaps after 80 per cent of the heroes of the novels she had read,³ Henry Tilney is an unconventional romantic hero, 'not quite handsome', though 'very near it' (25), and womanishly knowledgeable about not only fiction but fabrics. He is dominated and intimidated by his overbearing father, the General, himself 'a very handsome man, of a commanding aspect, past the bloom, but not past the vigour of life' (80). It is General Tilney, not his son, who pointedly relishes Catherine's physical attractions, appreciating the elasticity of her walk – and causing her to walk on 'with great elasticity, though she had never thought of it before' (103). (Sir Thomas Bertram of *Mansfield Park*, another propertied paterfamilias, also makes a young woman blush by appreciating her body.) The General invites Catherine to Northanger Abbey: misinformed that she is an heiress, he means to marry her to his clergyman son. (His older son Frederick, who will inherit Northanger Abbey, is a military man like his father, and a rake.) The coincidence of the

heroine's motive and the villain's, along with the hero's passivity, are among the nice ironies that make this romance so cheerful.

The sexy General is commanding, and when he instructs Catherine to ride in Henry's open curriole she agrees, even though she has already learned – and managed to get Mr. Allen to acknowledge – that it is improper for a young lady to ride alone with a gentleman in an open carriage. In the carriage Henry sets her up to expect 'all the horrors that a building such as "what one reads about" may produce' (157). He encourages her to expect to be lodged in a 'gloomy chamber – too lofty and extensive for you, with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size – its walls hung with tapestry exhibiting figures as large as life, and the bed, of dark green stuff or purple velvet, presenting even a funereal appearance'. Overriding her good-humoured, sensible protests that what he projects is impossible ('This is just like a book! – But it cannot really happen to me' [159]), he predicts what she will find in the secret chambers of the abbey in the matter-of-fact flat tones of the fiction that has captivated Catherine: 'In one perhaps there may be a dagger, in another a few drops of blood, and in a third the remains of some instrument of torture; but there being nothing in all this out of the common way, and your lamp being nearly exhausted, you will return towards your own apartment' (160). Catherine continues to protest that she is nothing like a gothic heroine, but she is drawn in by the familiar formulas; because she likes him, she falls for attractive Henry Tilney's skilful straight-faced teasing even though she was able to recognize it for what it was from the beginning, in Bath, when he solemnly discussed the durability and cost of muslin with Mrs. Allen, and she feared 'as she listened to their discourse, that he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others' (29).

Once they reach the abbey, and the cooperative elements provide the requisite storm, Catherine begins to imagine gothic horrors. For all its modern kitchens that are the General's particular pride, Northanger Abbey was 'a richly-endowed convent at the time of the Reformation' (142) and it is still redolent of the sinister spirituality and romance of a repudiated religion, therefore of stories like Ann Radcliffe's that are set on the dangerous, exotic continent of Europe. The General is imposing; his children are afraid of him; to Catherine, it is logical to imagine that he must have murdered his wife in the Abbey. Catherine is energetic, curious, and only seventeen; she has longed to visit an atmospheric old building the way she has wanted to dance, to walk, to learn to appreciate the picturesque, and to love a hyacinth. She is nothing like a quixotic, deluded, isolated reader who prefers romantic fantasies to the actual world: while Jane Austen enjoyed Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) and, later, Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* departs