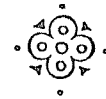


CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON

Jane Austen

WOMEN
POLITICS
AND THE
NOVEL



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FOR

Nicholas J. and E. Sandra Johnson

Northanger Abbey, both of which are menacing and "strange"—Catherine's recurrent expression—to one whose "real power," as Eleanor Tilney says of herself, "is nothing" (NA 225).

Just as conspicuously as *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey* concerns itself explicitly with the prerogatives of those who have what Eleanor calls "real power" and the constraints of those who do not. Henry Tilney is far from believing that women in general, much less Catherine or his own sister, have no "real power." To him, women's power—in marriage, in country dances, in daily life generally—is limited, but very real: "[M]an has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal" (NA 77). Henry's aphorism describes the conditions of female propriety as they had been traditionally conceived, and as they were reasserted throughout the 1790s by conservative advocates of female modesty. Women, by such accounts, are not initiators of their own choices, but rather are receivers of men's. If the "power of refusal" seems detrimental or frustrating in its negativity, it is still better than nothing, for it does not leave women without any control of their destinies: women may not be permitted to pursue what they want, but they may resist what they do not want. But in Austen's novels, as in so much eighteenth-century fiction about women, women's power of refusal is severely compromised. Many Austenian men—from Collins to Crawford to Wentworth—cannot take "no" for an answer.

In *Northanger Abbey*, bullying of various sorts is rampant, and Tilney's confidence in the feminine power of refusal is put to the test. Indeed Catherine's own friends have no scruples about lying in order to force her to comply with them rather than keep her own engagement with the Tilneys, and when caught in his lie, John Thorpe, with the apparent concurrence of Catherine's brother, "only laughed, smacked his whip . . . and drove on," overbearing her refusal: "angry and vexed as she was, having no power of getting away, [Catherine] was obliged to give up the point and submit" (NA 87). When mere lying and abduction are not apropos, James and the Thorpes join forces to compel Catherine to surrender her power of refusal. Together, they "demand" her agreement; they refuse her "refusal;" they "attack" her with reproach and supplication; and they resort to emotional manipulation ("I shall think you quite unkind, if you still refuse"), fraternal bullying ("Catherine, you must go"), and eventually even to physical compulsion ("Isabella . . . caught hold of one hand; Thorpe of the other" [NA 98–100]). So little is Catherine's brother inclined to respect woman's "only" power, refusal, that he defines, if not feminine, then at least sisterly virtue as a sweet-tempered yielding of her will altogether to his: "I did not think you had been so obstinate . . . you were not used to be so hard to persuade; you once were the kindest, best-

tempered of my sisters" (NA 99–100). The moral and physical coercion of powerless females which figures so predominantly in gothic fiction is here transposed to the daytime world of drawing room manners, where it can be shown for the everyday occurrence it is, but no less "strange" for all that.

Against the selfishness of James Morland and the bluster of John Thorpe, Henry Tilney stands out, not in opposition, but if anything in clearer relief, for his unquestioning confidence in his focality and in the breadth of his understanding prompts him to preempt not only the female's power of refusal but indeed even her power of speech in analogous ways, without doubting the propriety of his doing so. Brothers are treated with great respect in Austenian criticism, certainly with much more than they deserve if *Northanger Abbey* and *The Watsons* are considered with due weight. Because it is assumed that Austen's feelings for her brothers—about which we actually know rather little—were fond and grateful to the point of adoration, the sceptical treatment brother figures receive in her fiction has been little examined. Between Thorpe's remark that his younger sisters "both looked very ugly" (NA 49) and Tilney's reference to Eleanor as "my stupid sister" (NA 113), there is little difference, for in each case, the cool possession of privilege entitles them to disparaging banter, not the less corrosive for being entirely in the normal course of things. On most occasions, however, Tilney's bullying is more polished. A self-proclaimed expert on matters feminine, from epistolary style to muslin, Tilney simply believes that he knows women's minds better than they do, and he dismisses any "no" to the contrary as unreal. On the first day he meets Catherine, for example, he tells her exactly what she ought to write in her journal the next morning—the entry he proposes, needless to say, is devoted entirely to the praise of himself. Female speech is never entirely repressed in Austen's fiction, but instead is dictated so as to mirror or otherwise reassure masculine desire. But when Catherine protests, "But, perhaps, I keep no journal," Henry, flippantly but no less decisively does not take her "no" for an answer: "Perhaps you are not sitting in this room, and I am not sitting by you. These are points in which a doubt is equally possible" (NA 27). That, it would appear, is that, if for no other reason than that Henry himself has said so. But—for all we know to the contrary—Catherine does *not* keep a journal, and this will not be the first time that Henry, believing, as he says here, that reality itself is sooner doubted than the infallibility of his own inscriptions, will with magisterial complacency lay down the law. The effect for a woman like Catherine, "fearful of hazarding an opinion" of her own "in opposition to that of a self-assured man" (NA 48), is silencing, even when she knows she is right. Catherine would no more dream of opposing Henry here than she would

the General himself when he announces that even his heir must have a profession, for as Austen makes clear, silence is exactly what he wishes: "The imposing effect of this last argument was equal to his wishes. The silence of the lady [Catherine] proved it to be unanswerable" (NA 176).

Henry too, then, takes away the feminine power of refusal, simply by turning a deaf ear to it. In this respect, he is more graceful, but he is not essentially different from the General, who asks Eleanor questions only to answer them himself, or from John Thorpe, who declares that his horses are unruly when they are manifestly tame. The characteristic masculine activity in *Northanger Abbey* is measurement, a fiatlike fixing of boundaries—of mileage, of time, of money, and in Henry's case, of words. Although these boundaries turn out to be no less the projection of hopes and fears than are the overtly fanciful stuff of gothic novels, they are decreed as unanswerable facts, and the self-assurance of their promulgators enforces credence and silences dissent. Because Henry dictates the parameters of words, the kind of control he exercises extends to thought itself, the capacity for which he describes in explicitly sexual terms. Appearing to consider his respect for "the understanding of women" a somewhat unwarranted concession, Henry quips, "nature has given them so much [understanding], that they never find it necessary to use more than half" (NA 114). A great stickler for words, he bristles at any loosening of strict definition—such as relaxing the terms "nice" and "amazement"—and he is in the habit of "overpowering" offenders with "Johnson and Blair" (NA 108) when their usage transgresses prescribed boundaries. But when Catherine and Eleanor get entangled in their famous malentendu concerning "something very shocking indeed, [that] will soon come out in London" (NA 112), linguistic looseness has served them where Henry's correctness could not. To Catherine, of course, what is shocking, horrible, dreadful, and murderous can only be a new gothic novel; to Eleanor it can only be a mob uprising of three thousand. Henry regards the interchangeability of this vocabulary as proof of a feminine carelessness of thought and language which is regrettable, laughable, and endearing at the same time, and he enlightens them by vaunting his manliness and his lucidity: "I will prove myself a man, no less by the generosity of my soul than the clearness of my head" (NA 112).

Henry may be bantering again, but politically speaking the linguistic and intellectual superiority he boasts is no joke. During the 1790s in particular, privileged classes felt their hegemony on language, and with that power, seriously challenged by radical social critics—some of them women, and many of the men self-educated—from below, and as one scholar has recently demonstrated, conservatives met this challenge by asserting that the superiority of their language rendered them alone fit for participation

in public life. Tilney's esteemed Dr. Johnson played a posthumous role in this process, for those "aspects of Johnson's style that embodied hegemonic assessments of language" were "developed and imitated" as proper models.¹¹ With the authority of Johnson and Blair behind him, then, Henry is empowered to consider feminine discourse—conversation or gothic novels—as either mistaken or absurd, and in any case requiring his arbitration. The course of the novel attests, however, that the misunderstanding between Catherine and Eleanor is plausible and even insightful: political unrest and gothic fiction are well served by a common vocabulary of "horror" because they are both unruly responses to repression. Such, however, is not how Henry reads gothic novels, nor how he, in effect, teaches Catherine to read them. Indeed, the reason Catherine assents to ludicrously dark surmises about the cabinet is not that her imagination is inflamed with *Radcliffean* excesses, but rather that she trusts Henry's authority as a sensible man, and does not suspect that he, like John Thorpe but with much more charm, would impose on her credulity in order to amuse himself. "How could she have so imposed on herself," Catherine wonders. But soon she places the blame where it belongs: "And it was in a great measure his own doing, for had not the cabinet appeared so exactly to agree with his description of her adventures, she should never have felt the smallest curiosity about it" (NA 173). This exercise of power by "the knowing over the ignorant" is, as Judith Wilt has argued, "pure Gothic," and it is structured into the system of female education and manners.¹² In "justice to men," the narrator slyly avers that sensible men prefer female "ignorance" to female "imbecility"—let alone to the "misfortune" of knowledge—precisely because it administers to their "vanity" of superior knowledge (NA 110–11). Catherine's tendency to equate the verbs "to torment" and "to instruct" seems less confused given the humiliating upshot of her lesson in the gothic at Henry's hands.

But Henry, as we have seen, does not know everything. And what he does not know about gothic fiction in particular is explicitly related to his political outlook. Even though Austen spares us Tilney's "short disquisition on the state of the nation" (NA 111)—delivered in part to bring Catherine to "silence"—she does not hesitate to caricature his conservative tendency to be pollyannaish about the status quo. Catherine is a "hopeful scholar" not only in landscape theory but also in gothic novels, and her sensitivity to the lessons they afford far surpasses the capacity of her tutor, because her position of powerlessness and dependency give her a different perspective on the status quo. Gothic novels teach the deferent and self-deprecating Catherine to do what no one and nothing else does: to distrust paternal figures and to feel that her power of refusal is continuously under siege. While still in Bath, Catherine does not feel com-

he had pleasure in their society, a persuasion which of course recommended him still more." But Darcy's visits remain a puzzle: they seem "the effect of necessity rather than of choice—a sacrifice to propriety, not a pleasure to himself" (PP 180). When Darcy improves his manners, however, he becomes "desirous to please" (PP 263) Elizabeth, and "determined, to be pleased" (PP 262) by her, and it is this finally which impresses her with grateful desire that their happiness depend upon each other. Austen's concern with good manners, then, has decidedly political underpinnings: to be guilty of hauteur is to deprive people of a pleasing sense of self-esteem that it is legitimate for them to have.

Because no one else can be happy for us, the pursuit of happiness privileges private judgment and invites a degree of autonomy of which more conservative novelists were suspicious. Although Elizabeth is merely articulating the principle which, as we have seen, actuates everyone's behavior in the novel, among Austen's contemporaries perhaps only declared radicals would have a sympathetic character defiantly aver as she does, "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me" (PP 358). Admittedly, Austen does not push her luck, here or anywhere else in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth can say this and retain her credibility because we know that her happiness, unlike Lydia's, is not constituted by illicit sex. Further, she does not carry her determined autonomy so far as to rule out the wishes of people *not* so wholly unconnected with her, such as her parents. But whereas Hamilton, West, and More, for example, oppose the duty of filial obedience to the vagaries of private judgment, Austen, as critics have long recognized, typically removes her heroines from the parental abode altogether precisely in order to free them from this necessity and to oblige them to think and act for themselves. Except in *Mansfield Park*, Austen tends to skirt the whole issue of filial obedience. The conflict momentarily evoked when Elizabeth must decide whether forever to alienate her mother by refusing Collins or her father by accepting him is comically dissipated when Mrs. Bennet's rage dwindles into impotent peevishness. Elizabeth would presumably not defy concerted parental opposition, although everything we have seen of her mother's folly and her father's negligence plainly shows that they need their young daughter's advice more than she needs theirs. But if Elizabeth does not specifically rule out the possibility of consulting with her parents before acting in that manner which will, in her own opinion, constitute her happiness, her omission specifically to rule it in here as an obligation is just as striking.

If Austen tends to avoid considering how and when the independence she clearly values conflicts with those sensitive imperatives of duty as

would apply between parent and child, her novels devote a lot of attention to coercion, bullying, and advice among friends, and all of these are problematic to an ethic championing personal choice and self-responsibility. Austen clearly highlights such issues when Elizabeth and Darcy debate the merits of adherence in a personal decision versus persuadability to a friend's opposing advice:

"To yield readily—easily—to the *persuasion* of a friend," [Elizabeth observes,] "is no merit with you."

"To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either." (PP 50)

Johnson had pointed out that giving advice is gratifying because of the "temporary appearance of superiority" (*Rambler* No. 87) it gives us, and conversely, receiving advice is typically painful because it "interrupts our enjoyment of our own approbation" (*Rambler* No. 40). Austen matches Johnson's awareness of how the love of power and claims of pride complicate the giving and receiving of counsel. Indeed, Bingley rather offends his friend when he impatiently divulges that, claims to persuade by conviction rather than by coercion to the contrary, what Darcy really likes is to box him around: "I assure you that if Darcy were not such a great tall fellow, in comparison with myself, I should not pay him half so much deference. I declare I do not know a more awful object than Darcy, on particular occasions, and in particular places" (PP 50–51). As it happens, the ideal of enlightened counsel and freely reasoned assent is achieved notably *not* in his own relations, but rather in those of women. Mrs. Gardiner's offer and Elizabeth's acceptance of advice not to encourage Wickham, for example, is "a wonderful instance of advice being given on such a point, without being resented" (PP 145) because both persons here are equal and unreserved parties in a rational friendship, where domination plays no part.

Elizabeth has cause later to reproach Bingley for the sweet-tempered ductility she praises here. The same amiable disposition which conduces so to his happiness also jeopardizes that happiness. Elizabeth finds it hard to think "without anger, hardly without contempt, on that easiness of temper, that want of proper resolution which now made him the slave of his designing friends, and led him to sacrifice his own happiness to the caprice of their inclinations" (PP 133). Austen puts a high premium on self-responsibility and stability of purpose even with her female characters—many of whom have little truck with the deference and hesitancy dictated to them as sex-differentiated virtues. But for her male characters, dependence on the wishes or the purses of others, if sometimes exonerated as a necessity, is never admirable, as we have already seen in *Sense and*