

General Tilney and the Milsom Street Merchants —Brothers Under the Skin?

JOAN R. VREDENBURGH

Roger Williams University, Department of Literature and Philosophy,
One Old Ferry Road, Bristol, RI 02809-2921

In Chapter Three of *Northanger Abbey*, while in the company of Henry Tilney, Catherine Morland is somewhat disturbed by the tenor of some of Henry's remarks. During Tilney's conversation with Mrs. Allen concerning Bath and the washability of Catherine's gown, Austen describes Catherine's thoughts: "Catherine feared, as she listened to their discourse, that he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others" (29). A rather astute characterization—Henry does have a remarkable ability to see through a person's pretense and zero in on the weakest part of his or her character. An illustration of this is his choice of lodgings for his father. When Catherine first meets Henry, he is in town to secure suitable lodgings for his father and sister for their stay in Bath. A seemingly mundane matter, but in reality this is no simple task. Those families who chose to stay in Bath during the latter part of the 18th century knew just how necessary it was to live in an acceptable part of the city. Because of the public nature of Bath—and the fact that the addresses of new arrivals were published in the Pump Room—"the importance of choosing lodgings in a correct neighbourhood could not be overlooked" (Watkins 179). A family's social and economic status could be gauged by what part of the town they lived in during their stay. Those who were wealthy and fashionable—or wanted to be perceived as such—chose the fashionable neighbourhoods. One such fashionable area was Milsom Street. Mrs. Allen comments upon this when noting how fast the Tilney's Milsom Street lodgings were let after the departure of the General: "His lodgings were taken the very day after he left them. . . . But no wonder; Milsom Street you know" (238). Being fashionable, these lodgings are quite suitable for a man of the General's pretensions. He is a fashionable man of wealth and property with titled friends. Thus on the surface Henry's choice is entirely suitable. Yet at the same time it is a rather sly comment upon the flawed aspect of his father's character. By choosing to have the General live in Milsom Street, Henry, and by extension, Austen, are portraying the General as one who, in spite of his high military rank and his aristocratic pretensions, has the basic outlook of the consumer merchant middle class that is rising to a dominant position in nineteenth-century England.

Maggie Lane, in her book *A Charming Place*, notes that during the time in which Austen was writing, Milsom Street was one of three

main shopping thoroughfares in Bath—the other two being Bath and Bond streets (60). Milsom Street was a shopper's paradise; all sorts of shops sold all sorts of goods. R. S. Neale cites a 19th century description of Milsom Street:

The street is elegant and imposing . . . all is bustle and gaiety; numerous dashing equipages passing and re-passing and then gracing the doors of the tradesmen. The shops are tastefully laid out; capacious and elegant; . . . in short Milsom Street . . . afford[s] to the utmost extent everything towards supplying the real or imaginary wants of the visitors. (266)

Placing the General in the midst of this retail mecca is a comment upon the General's love of purchasing all the latest "must haves" which fashion dictates. Indeed, Tony Tanner characterizes the General as a "monomaniacal, greedy, ruthless dehumanised consumer-acquisitor" (65). This is certainly an apt description of the General and it is supported by his actions in the second half of the novel. During Catherine's stay at Northanger, Catherine has to endure the General's constant displaying of all his latest fashionable possessions—from carpets and furnishings to the "old" Wedgwood breakfast set.

Yet the General is more than a buyer. In fact during the first half of the novel, he is never depicted as buying anything. Rather, the General's behavior in the Bath section of *Northanger Abbey* illustrates him to be a merchant—similar to those who surround him in Milsom Street. In his case, he is the exclusive retailer of some rather expensive items—his children—and he is intent upon marketing them to the highest bidders.

Using the scene where the General discusses the Wedgwood breakfast set, Christopher Kent compares the General to another middle class merchant—Josiah Wedgwood. Kent states that Wedgwood was "one of the most astute marketers in the annals of English entrepreneurship" who "profited from snobbery" (98). Kent goes on to argue:

General Tilney is almost the embodiment of Wedgwood's marketing strategy. Wedgwood sold his ware at prices far above his competitors' in elegant showrooms selling nothing else. Here the prices were exhibited with great éclat, and new lines introduced with carefully orchestrated fanfares of publicity, and special viewings by ticket only for the "Nobility and Gentry." (98-99)

The General follows this marketing plan to the letter. His elegant showrooms are the venues of Bath—the theatre, the Assembly Rooms, the Pump Room. His fanfare of publicity includes sending his son ahead to announce the impending arrival of the Tilney wares. And of course, the General is only interested in displaying his wares to suitably fashionable "Nobility and Gentry." Witness his treatment of Catherine.

The General is snobbish. Used to dealing only with the wealthy, he is rather dismissive and contemptuous of those he believes to be not so wealthy. This is evidenced in the scene where Catherine first tries to enter the General's Milsom Street lodging. Since the General does not recognize her name, she is not worth his delaying his walk—after all, he has to display his daughter to those eligible buyers who might be interested. He has little compunction in turning Catherine away at the door. Yet his demeanor dramatically changes after a discussion with John Thorpe (another salesman who is intent on selling himself). After hearing of her supposed wealth and future expectations, the General mistakenly assumes Catherine is a suitable prospective customer. Catherine's next encounter with the General is similar to a customer's encounter with a shopkeeper. When Catherine rushes into the drawing room at Milsom Street in Chapter 13, Austen characterizes her purpose as the "business" (102)—a word Austen uses in other retail scenes (Elinor Dashwood in Gray's shop in London). After Catherine's befuddled explanation, the General assumes his role as retail merchant.

Edith Sitwell in her book *Bath* describes the behavior and demeanor of typical retailers in Bath. ". . . mercers are the performers in the opera . . . they are the sweetest, fairest, nicest, most dished-out creatures; and by their elegant and soft speeches, you would guess them to be Italians'" (69). So obliging were some retailers that they had an assistant whose "sole business was to be gentleman usher of the shop, to stand completely dressed at the door . . . and hand ladies in and out'" (69). A rather appropriate description of the General



Milsom Street: illustration by Bridget Sudworth from *A Charming Place, Bath in the Life and Times of Jane Austen* by Maggie Lane, published by Millstream Books.

whose "solicitous politeness" and "anxious attention" are amply supplemented by his effusive and constant flattery. He appears angered that Catherine was not properly announced, or handed in, by the servant. He continues in this vein when Catherine comes next to dine in Milsom Street. While Henry and Eleanor are rather subdued, the merchant Tilney is constant with his "thanks, invitations, and compliments" (129).

Perhaps the best example of the General as salesman is his invitation to Catherine to visit Northanger Abbey. Sitwell quotes an unidentified source describing the sales pitch of the Bath shopkeeper: "... after an obliging smile and pretty mouth, made, Cicero-like to expatiate on [the product's] goodness" (69). The General's sales pitch is a mixture of servile flattery, and at the same time, praises of the virtues of the product.

"Can you, in short, be prevailed on to quit the scene of public triumph and oblige your friend Eleanor with your company in Gloucestershire? I am almost ashamed to make the request, though its presumption would certainly appear greater to every creature in Bath than yourself. Modesty such as your's—but not for the world would I pain it by open praise. If you can be induced to honour us with a visit, you will make us happy beyond expression. 'Tis true, we can offer you nothing like the gaieties of this lively place; we can tempt you neither by amusement nor splendour, for our mode of living, as you see, is plain and unpretending; yet no endeavors shall be wanting on our side to make Northanger Abbey not wholly disagreeable." (139-40)

Catherine, a salesman's dream, of course agrees with enthusiasm. The merchant-General has baited his hook well. By selling the visit, he hopes to close the deal at Northanger Abbey with the sale of his son.

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