



The Rev. Henry Tilney, Rector of Woodston

IRENE COLLINS

Irene Collins is an Honorary Senior Fellow of the University of Liverpool, England. She is the author of *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (1994) and *Jane Austen: The Parson's Daughter* (1999).

A STUDY OF HENRY TILNEY has much to tell us about the clergy of the Church of England in the late eighteenth century. One of his notable features is his zeal in rooting out what Jane Austen would have known as “secret sins.” These were not necessarily hidden crimes: on the contrary, they were more likely to be transgressions so trivial that the perpetrator could see little or no harm in them and might genuinely have regarded them as best forgotten. Consider, for instance, the worst offense committed by Catherine Morland at Northanger Abbey. She suspects, with good reason, that General Tilney is not all that he should be; and because she has never, in her father’s country parish at Fullerton, encountered anyone like him, she imagines him to be a villain of the kind she has just been introduced to in Gothic novels. Secretly, she investigates the bedroom in which such a villain would have murdered his wife. No sooner does she see the dimity bed hangings, the modern furniture, the sunlight streaming through the sash windows, than she realizes how gullible she has been. Fortunately, she has told no one of her suspicion; if she can escape before anyone sees her, all will be well. This, however, is not to be, for she meets Henry on the stairs, and Henry is determined to find out what she has been doing. Her attempts at evasion are useless.

“You have had a very fine day for your ride,” [she

suggests, desperately].

“Very,” [he replies,]—and does Eleanor leave you to find your way into all the rooms in the house by yourself?”

“Oh no!”

“Have you looked into all the rooms in that passage?” [he persists.]

“No, I only wanted to see—Is it not very late? I must go and dress.”

“It is only a quarter past four,” [he points out relentlessly,] “and you are not now in Bath. Half an hour at Northanger must be enough.” (195)

After two more pages of this inquisition, with Henry “looking into her countenance,” “earnestly regarding her,” “his quick eye fixed on hers,” she begins to think that her little act of foolishness was positively criminal. He ends by giving her the biggest dressing down of her short life (193-98).

Secret sins were described at some length by Jane Austen’s favorite sermon writer, Archbishop Thomas Sherlock. In a discourse entitled “On self-examination,” he listed them as “sins committed in ignorance, sins we have fallen into through habit, and sins we have simply forgotten.” Though seemingly trivial, they may have done harm to others without one’s knowledge; thinking ill of a fellow creature was particularly mentioned. Hence, Sherlock warned, “for every idle word, how soon soever it slips from our memory, for every vain imagination of the heart, how soon soever it vanishes away, we shall give an account on the day of judgement” (Knox 276-80). To avoid so serious a climax we should review our conduct at the end of each day and ask God to forgive whatever he had seen amiss in it. Jane Austen clearly took this advice to heart. In each of the prayers she wrote for family use at Chawton, there are petitions asking God’s forgiveness for secret sins. Indeed, they are the only kind of sin she mentions. “Teach us to understand the sinfulness of our hearts,” we read, “and bring to our remembrance every fault of temper and every evil habit in which we have indulged.” And again: “We have perhaps sinned against thee and against our fellow creatures in many instances of which we have no remembrance. Pardon oh God! whatever thou hast seen amiss in us” (*Minor Works* 453-57).

With the change from Catholicism to Protestantism at the

Reformation, the Church of England gave up the practice of regular confession before a priest. For this reason, the need for private confession was urged more seriously, especially before presuming to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. There were several manuals that could be purchased to assist people in their soul-searching. At the age of eighteen, Jane Austen was given a copy of one of the most popular of these aids: William Vickers's *Companion to the Altar*. According to members of her family, she made constant use of the devotions contained in it, one of which was a prayer for "a ray of heavenly light" by which to detect secret sins. Catherine Morland, we are told, was vouchsafed not "a ray of heavenly light" but "a ray of common sense" (193), which to a good Anglican like Jane Austen, brought up on the principles of the Enlightenment, would have been the same thing.¹

To carry out all William Vickers's advice would have required several hours of meditation. It is not surprising that Archdeacons, during their triennial visitations of the churches in their care, found that attendance at Communion services was very low. Many simple people, it seems, believed that only educated parishioners could qualify. They themselves were afraid to partake of the Sacrament lest they had failed to detect some subtle fault in themselves and would thereby incur the damnation that St. Paul forecast for any who ate and drank of the body and blood of Christ unworthily (Walsh 23). William Vickers tried to dispel such fears, but few parishioners were likely to have been reassured by his view that St. Paul was not threatening hellfire so much as some temporal punishment such as illness or death. Thomas Sherlock, whose sermons were read from many a pulpit, was more comforting. The Prayer Book, he pointed out, required repentance in general terms only: "We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed by thought, word and deed against thy Divine Majesty. . . ." There was no need to be morbidly introspective before repeating such words. Nor was there any need to doubt God's immediate forgiveness and forgetfulness. Henry Tilney was perhaps thinking on such lines when Catherine found that he never mentioned her foolish escapade again, and seemed, in time, to have forgotten all about it.

Before leaving the episode, however, it is worth considering more closely the terms in which he had rebuked her on the stairs. How could she possibly have pictured a fellow countryman behaving

like the villain of a Gothic novel? “Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. 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?” (197). These words were entirely in line with contemporary thinking on the subject by English society, particularly within the church. The so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 was believed to have been brought about by God’s Providence and to have been a triumph for true religion and civil liberty over obscurantism and tyranny: there was a service in the Book of Common Prayer that implied as much. From that time onward, Englishmen had been encouraged to regard their country as God’s own country, and to believe that they had been born into it by God’s design. The Rev. Isaac Watt’s *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, published in 1715 and popular in English nurseries for more than a century, ensured that these ideas were inculcated at an early age. The fifth song, for instance, taught children to thank God for their native land in the following terms:

’Tis to thy Sovereign Grace I owe,
That I was born on British Ground^e
Where Streams of Heavenly Mercy flow,
And Words of sweet Salvation sound. (7-8)

Another of the songs began:

Lord, I ascribe it to thy grace,
And not to chance as others do,
That I was born of Christian race,
And not a heathen or a Jew.

This was accompanied, in Victorian editions of the work, by a woodcut showing a crowd of worshippers in Oriental costume bowing low under the palm trees to an idol carved in wood or stone (17). But when Englishmen in the eighteenth century thanked God for their Englishness, they were not always comparing their country with pagan areas of the world. Far from it. They were much more likely to be thinking of Catholic Europe. The Gothic novels that Henry Tilney spurned as a guide to the conduct of Englishmen were usually set in France, Italy, Spain, or southern Germany—admittedly in times past, but always well within the Christian era. Because these countries were Catholic, they could be expected to furnish sly priests hand in glove

with sinister overlords, unhindered by institutions protecting innocent persons. Protestantism, by contrast, encouraged its adherents to question authority, thereby promoting freedom and justice. True Protestantism, moreover, was to be found only in the Church of England, a moderate institution that protected its members from the idolatry of Roman Catholicism on the one hand and the blind enthusiasm of Lutherans, Calvinists, and Dissenters on the other (Walsh 15-16, 70, 125).

If Henry Tilney's religious views are typical of his time, his excursions into artistic and literary appreciation are also significant. He is knowledgeable about the picturesque, as were many of the clergy. He also reads Gothic novels, which was not quite so unusual as Catherine Morland believed. Novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Midnight Bell* could be seen to have much to commend them. Their heroines are much given to prayer; right triumphs over wrong; and supernatural appearances are rationally explained before they can lead the reader into superstition and necromancy. The only Gothic novel a clergyman might have felt he must eschew was M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*, which had been condemned as immoral by the most influential religious critic of the age, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.³ In *Northanger Abbey* it is not Henry Tilney but the loutish John Thorpe who has read *The Monk*.

Yet although Henry Tilney can discourse eloquently on both the picturesque and the Gothic, he ignores the one element that combines the two, namely, the emotional effect of landscape. In discussing the view of Bath from Beechen Cliff he has nothing to say about its effect on the beholder, although countless visitors had been enraptured by it. He applies instead the rules that Gilpin had invented for the use of persons incapable of evaluating landscape through their own spontaneous reactions. He talked, we are told, "of foregrounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades" (111). Marianne Dashwood would have been horrified by his cold, analytical approach. On the way to Northanger Abbey he regales Catherine with a lively skit on the Gothic novel, but he confines himself to the interior of his imaginary house—to vaulted chambers and subterranean passages and to the regular paraphernalia of funereal bed-hangings, mysterious chests, drops of blood, and carelessly discarded instruments of torture. Apart from a brief reference to thunder

rolling round the neighboring mountains there is no mention of the environs of the Abbey. These omissions can of course be explained quite simply. On the walk up Beechen Cliff, Henry is giving Catherine a lecture on drawing, not aesthetics, and on the way to Northanger Abbey he abandons his tale before laughter overtakes him. It is also the case, however, that the uses made of landscape by Gothic writers were not wholly in accordance with the teachings of the church. The “natural religion” that had developed within the Church of England during the Enlightenment presented the varieties of landscape as evidence of God’s greatness and as reminders to mankind to live in harmony. In Gothic novels they serve a different purpose. Tiers of barren rock upset the moral equilibrium, swirling waters confuse the intellect, and deep gorges filled with dark pines or ancient oaks allow evil to lurk and fester. This would never have done for Henry Tilney, in whose eyes reason must always prevail. One suspects that had Henry ever fallen down a ravine, as Coleridge once did, he would have reacted like the poet, who fought off an instinct to laugh at himself, refused to be overawed by the fearsome cliffs rising on either side of him, raised his eyes to the heavens above and thanked God aloud for “the powers of Reason and the Will, which remaining, no Danger can overpower us.”⁴

These nuances were lost on the makers of the BBC film version of *Northanger Abbey*, who chose to change Henry’s occupation from that of a clergyman to that of a landed gentleman with an estate at some distance from his parental home. They can perhaps be excused, for as a clergyman Henry’s appearance and behavior would have needed a good deal of explaining to modern viewers. A clergyman in the late eighteenth century wore no distinctive dress outside the pulpit. The dog collar had not yet been invented, and the days were gone when Parson Adams travelled about the country in a very short greatcoat with his cassock tucked up above the knees (Fielding 73, 130, 270). Henry was one of an increasing number of clergy, amounting to perhaps a quarter of the entire body in Jane Austen’s southern counties, who came from the gentry class and could afford to conduct themselves like any other young gentlemen of fashion. He drives a smart curricule and wears a stylish hat along with a greatcoat with several capes. He dances at balls—and not only at private gatherings, as Mr. Collins does in *Pride and Prejudice* and as Wilberforce had advised his

Evangelical followers to do. At Bath, Henry appears at a public assembly and cheerfully allows the Master of Ceremonies to introduce him to a completely unknown young lady as dancing partner. Catherine Morland spends an evening with him without realizing that he is a clergyman; it is left to Mr. Allen, in *loco parentis*, to inquire into his credentials.

Catherine sees nothing to comment on in the fact that Henry habitually spends five or six weeks of the season in Bath. When invited to stay at Northanger Abbey, she imagines that Henry is going to be there all the time. He has a parish at Woodston, some twenty miles away, but there was no reason to assume that he lived there. When the novel was written, in 1798, there was no law obliging clergy to live in their parishes; and even when one was passed, in 1808, it was difficult to enforce. Some three thousand of England's 7,500 parishes had no parsonage fit for a clergyman to live in; and in any case a third of the clergy of the Church of England held more than one parish and could not live in them all. Some clergy never saw their parishes from one year's end to another.

Henry, however, is conscientious. Not only does he employ a curate, whom he would have to pay out of his own pocket since there were no central funds for the purpose, but he actually visits Woodston himself for several days at a time. Indeed, he describes it as half his home. Most often he goes on business, perhaps to attend the annual vestry meeting at which churchwardens were elected, or to advise the magistrates on some matter of law and order or poor relief. At one point in the novel he goes there on a weekend, presumably to preach. Unfortunately, Jane Austen's reticence on the subject of religion precludes her from following him into the church. One would have liked to hear Henry preach, if only to find out what the owners of all those little chandler's shops made of his performance.

Henry's parish is more lucrative than most. Even when his father cuts him off, there is no question of his having to set up a school or take up farming on a commercial scale as George Austen and many another clergyman did. He will ultimately inherit money from his mother's marriage settlements, but until this time comes, his parish alone, we are told, will provide him with "an income of independence and comfort" (250). The Rev. Richard Morland, who is himself not exactly poor, considers Henry's financial position far beyond

anything his daughter could have expected in a husband. For Woodston to be so lucrative, the farmers in the area must have been prosperous and hence liable to a goodly sum in tithes: as rector, rather than vicar, Henry would be entitled to a tenth of the annual gross product of the land of the parish. There must also have been a reasonable area of glebe (the land donated to the church by faithful parishioners in times past for the upkeep of the clergyman). George Austen at Steventon had a mere three acres of glebeland; Mr. Papillon at Chawton had sixty-four. In Henry Tilney's case the acreage is not mentioned, but we read of "fine meadows," to which General Tilney may have added some land of his own, since he boasts to Catherine of having taken care that the living should not be a bad one.

Henry has been lucky in more ways than one. Not many ordinands were in possession of a living at the age of twenty-four or twenty-five; indeed, some fifteen per cent of them never acquired a living at all. Henry has not had to secure influential friends at Oxford, or court the local gentry on the hunting field, or scour the most distant ramifications of his family tree in order to secure the gift of a parish: his father has been able to hand him one on a plate. The General has even been getting it ready for him for the past ten years or more. Among other things, he has been building a parsonage.

The Tilneys must have been patrons of Woodston ever since they acquired Northanger Abbey and its appurtenances at the Reformation, but like many another landed family they seem hitherto to have shown very little interest in their rights of patronage. It was only in the late eighteenth century, when improvements in agriculture made tithes and glebe more profitable, that gentry patrons found it worthwhile to install their own sons in parishes within their gift. Only then did they begin building handsome parsonages. Henry's parsonage is not only built of stone rather than common brick, but also has all the features thought proper for a small house at the time—green gates, a semicircular sweep, and a drawing room with windows reaching down to the ground. The garden, too, will soon be in the height of fashion. Henry is wealthy enough to begin enclosing one of his meadows within walls in order to plant an ornamental garden and a shrubbery—a move that George Austen could afford to consider only toward the end of his forty-year ministry at Steventon.

One has the impression that General Tilney would have insisted

on Henry becoming rector of Woodston whether he liked the idea or not. The greedy old man would never have wanted those lucrative tithes to end up in the pocket of a stranger. Fortunately, there is no sign that Henry resented the plans made for him. He did not need to feel that he had received a call from God: in the eighteenth century the position of clergyman was regarded as a profession, not a vocation. In Henry's case it turned out to have the practical advantage of providing him with a refuge when he felt obliged to leave Northanger Abbey. However vindictive General Tilney may have felt at his son's behavior, he could not have dismissed him from the incumbency at Woodston having once appointed him. Mr. Collins had no need to be so obsequious to Lady Catherine De Bourgh; whatever he had done, she could not have got rid of him.

Like many an intelligent parson buried away in the country, Henry is lonely at Woodston during his bachelor days. His father owns most of the land in the area, so there is no resident squire with whom he can consort, and the remainder of the inhabitants of the parish would be shopkeepers, yeomen farmers, and laborers. A large Newfoundland puppy and two or three terriers are described as the only friends of his solitude (212). It was taken for granted at the time that a clergyman in possession of a country parish would soon be looking for a wife. One wonders how Catherine would face up to requirements. Let us hope that Henry continued to be amused by her. One cannot help feeling that his wit would often be wasted on her.

The clergy were widely regarded as good conversationalists. They were, after all, better educated than the majority of the people, including the gentry. But Henry Tilney is exceptional. It was David Cecil who first suggested that he was modelled on the Rev. Sydney Smith, the most brilliant talker of the age (Cecil 79).⁵ The main argument against the idea is that Jane Austen denied basing her characters on individuals. This apart, however, there is much to be said for the suggestion.

Although there is no direct evidence that Jane Austen ever met Sydney Smith, there was one notable occasion when she might easily have done so. Among the Austens' friends at Steventon, the one most likely to have rivalled Mrs. Bennet in showing off her visiting relatives to the rest of the neighborhood was Mrs. Bramston of Oakley Hall. Her visitors frequently included her husband's cousin, Michael Hicks

Beach, and his wife, Henrietta Maria, whose eldest son would one day inherit Oakley Hall since the Bramstons were childless. Mrs. Austen got to know the Hicks Beaches so well that they featured in one of her rhyming ditties (Selwyn 29), and Jane, too, mentioned them in a letter to Cassandra, expressing her sympathy when one of their little girls died (“especially as it is the one like me”) (9-10 January 1796).

Among their many properties, the Hicks Beaches owned an estate at Netheravon on the edge of Salisbury Plain, which was such a dead alive spot that they took pity on a young curate buried away there and, in 1796, gave him what he described as “a joyful resurrection” by appointing him tutor to their son Michael. The following year, when Jane Austen and her mother were staying with the Leigh-Perrots at Bath, Smith and his young charge arrived in the town on the first stage of a cultural tour. Mrs. Austen may have been told of their impending arrival by Mrs. Bramston. Failing this, Aunt Leigh-Perrot was sure to have seen their names in the Pump Room Book. Even without such information, the Master of Ceremonies would have regarded a clergyman-tutor as the very person to introduce to a clergyman’s daughter had they coincided at an Assembly in the Lower Rooms.

It is tempting to think that Jane and Sydney danced and drank tea together, and that Sydney enjoyed himself at the expense of Aunt Leigh Perrot as Henry Tilney does at the expense of Mrs. Allen. He was noted for embarking on such conversations without malice aforethought and for being able to carry them off without causing offense. His protégé, Michael Hicks Beach, was learning to dance. If he, too, was present at the ball, Jane might have noticed that Smith was a trifle school-masterish with him, especially on the subject of language (echoes of Henry Tilney taking Catherine Morland to task on her use of the word “nice”). The two were on friendly terms, but it has been suggested that the boy was sometimes overawed by his tutor’s ready wit, and made to feel foolish in face of his devastating common sense. Like Henry Tilney, Smith could be alarmingly grave and authoritarian when occasion demanded. For the rest of the time, however, he seemed to be in constant high spirits. He delighted in talking nonsense on serious subjects and in producing strings of ludicrous images to prove his point: Henry Tilney’s comparison between dancing and marriage was very much in his line.

Whether Jane Austen modelled Henry Tilney on Sydney Smith or not, the fact that she made his conversation so sparkling as to invite comparison with Smith's is a remarkable achievement, for persons as discriminating as Gladstone, Lord Macauley, and Lord John Russell regarded Smith's flights of fancy and gift of repartee as unique and inimitable. It also indicates how highly we should regard Henry, for it has been said that the Church of England never again had so witty and wise a representative as the man known affectionately as "the Smith of Smiths."

NOTES

1. David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982); William Vickers, *A Companion to the Altar, Shewing the Nature and Necessity of a Sacramental Preparation, In order to our worthy Receiving of the Holy Communion* was appended (without pagination) to many eighteenth-century editions of the Book of Common Prayer.
2. In later editions of the work, the word "Brittish" was changed to "British." In the nineteenth century, "British" was changed to "Christian."
3. Coleridge's article, published in *The Critical Review* (March 1797) is outlined in Louis F. Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961) 24–25.
4. Letter to Sara Hutchinson, 6 August 1802, in E. L. Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71) ii, 451.
5. For Sydney Smith, see especially Hesketh Pearson, *The Smith of Smiths* (London: Harper & Brathers, 1934, repr. 1984), and Gerald Bullett, *Sydney Smith: A Biography and Selection* (London: 1951, repr. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1971).

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