

## Her Passion for Ancient Edifices

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“Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney—and castles and abbies made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill” (p. 141).<sup>1</sup> Certainly no reader of *Northanger Abbey* questions Catherine’s passion for the two, much less the source. “Is it like what one reads of?” She asked John Thorpe about Blaize Castle as well as Henry Tilney about “The fine old place,” the Abbey. Less certain, however, is whether her creator’s passion is based solely on her reading, since as usual JA does not halt to explain her sources, in this case for one real edifice, the other fictional. Of course, JA has been acclaimed for her scruples in writing only of places with which she has personal acquaintance. Therefore, in ferreting out that knowledge, one treads lightly, sufficiently forewarned by Henry’s lecturing of Catherine “. . . if it is to be guesswork, let us all guess for ourselves. To be guided by second-hand conjecture is pitiful.”

What strikes the reader, however, is that in her references JA reveals such exactitude as to make her knowledge irrefutable. Furthermore, her ancient edifices, drawn like Catherine’s from her reading, find antecedents in her own considerable acquaintance. And, finally, the tiny castle scene creates a synecdoche of the extended Abbey adventure. It shows JA working in her characteristic mode, the miniature scene, so highly prized by readers from Sir Walter Scott on.

Catherine’s few queries of Blaize’s age, keep, ramparts, and towers are not randomly chosen but carefully selected to recall her country’s long history of castle building. Her method here is similar to that in the compilation of Isabella’s list of horrid mysteries where, as has been observed, she suggests the origin, efflorescence and decline of the Gothic romance. The keep recalls the twelfth-century Golden Age of castle building; the ramparts, the coming thirteenth-century innovation of the flying parapet; and the towers prefigure the long tradition of curtain wall ones, a characteristic feature of late medieval castles.

Four more references anterior to *Northanger Abbey* reflect further evidence of JA’s castlere, suggesting, unlike Catherine, a willing look into her country’s history. In the much admired juvenilian *Lesley Castle*, Sir George is fluttering in a house on fashionable Portman Square in London contracting a second marriage, while in Scotland his daughters Margaret and Matilda are secluded in their “Old and Mouldering Castle” situated “on a bold projecting Rock.” Upon arrival there, the new Lady Lesley calls the residence “a dismal old Weatherbeaten Castle” and writes a friend: “It is actually perched upon a Rock to appearance so totally inaccessible, that I expected to have been pulled up by a rope.” The seventeen-year-old JA is spoofing one of the most salient facts of castle building, that of rational use of natural defensive features. At the same time she bases the scene on an historical awareness that from the fifteenth century on the English devoted more attention to comfort and luxury than to fortification to which the Scots were bound two or three centuries longer. And in *Lady Susan* that selfish, eponymous heroine is almost ready to have second thoughts about having

opposed her husband's younger brother from buying Vernon Castle when she rationalizes: "Everybody ought to respect the delicacy of those feelings, which could not endure that my Husband's Dignity should be lessened by his younger brother's having possession of the Family Estate." Her reasoning reveals a seventeenth-century innovation of wealthy gentlemen feeding their pretensions by calling their houses "The Castle" or "The Tower."

In the 1803 *The Watsons* the family live in Osborne Castle where, according to Tom, who invites Emma to it, there is a "monstrous stuff'd fox & badger," a spoof of the trophies often hanging on the castle's tapestried walls. The final reference is in the 1814 *Mansfield Park* when Fanny Price at Sotherton is disappointed in its chapel, finding nothing "awful," "melancholy," or "grand." Edmund reminds her that the chapel had been lately built "for how confined a purpose, compared with the old chapels of castles and monasteries." Both are clear reminders of the twilight of her country's glorious romance with the castle. Before its demise in her own age, however, some wealthy gentlemen erected sham castles and this practice leads us to the Blaize Castle scene.

(Because Blaize has been covered elsewhere in this issue, it remains only to be emphasized why Catherine is not permitted to reach that sham castle.) Such would have rendered impossible the later experiences at General Tilney's, for a young lady with, as Henry says, "a teachableness of a disposition" would not twice make the same mistake. A case may be made perhaps that JA sacrificed too much in not creating a scene so potentially funny, so epitomizing Thorpe's "propensities of a rattle," and certainly utilizing the most spectacular stock gothic convention, the overturned carriage. However, having penned the scene of Thorpe's outrageous dialogue in Bath about carriages, horses, driving and distances, she contents herself in bringing all in readiness for Northanger's explicit lessons. Thus the miniature scene points to JA's own formidable knowledge of England's castle history and to the more important Northanger experience.

What is the source of JA's knowledge, (not only of Blaize on which Maggie Lane has written) but of castles in general? Like her hero, she was influenced in no little degree by her reading. Indeed the first of the horrid mysteries Isabella recommends is about a castle, Mrs. Parson's *Castle of Wolfenbach*, and it is known that Crosby and Co., which had in 1803 purchased *Northanger Abbey*, saw into print over the years a considerable number of novels about castles and abbeys. Her greatest source undoubtedly was Mrs. Radcliffe, whose *The Romance of the Forest*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *The Italian*, provided the idea for one of Catherine's reveries. When Thorpe is forced to turn back before the castle is reached, Catherine is so concerned over what the Tilneys might think about her unkept appointment for a country walk that "she would willingly have given up all the happiness which its walls could supply—the happiness of a progress through a long suite of lofty rooms. . . The happiness of being stopped in their way along narrow, winding vaults. . . or even of having their lamp. . . extinguished by a sudden gust of wind." Her candlelit exploration evokes Mrs. Radcliffe's battered castles, subterranean passages and omnipresent flickering candles. JA's interest in such works seems sustained for in 1814 while her brother Henry is absorbed in reading her somber *Mansfield Park* she is tearing through the three volumes of Barrett's *The Heroine*, which she called "a delightful burlesque, particularly on the Radcliffe style."<sup>2</sup>

However, for an author scrupulous enough in detail that Dr. Chapman, for example, could determine the date of Catherine's exploration of the mysterious apartment as 19 March because of the tiny piece of information that "at four o'clock, the sun was now two hours above the horizon" and which in checking the records at Greenwich he discovered on that March 19 day the sun set at 6:09!—she surely had personal knowledge on which to draw (*NA*, p. 277).

A desperate traveller as well as a desperate walker, JA travelled to locations where she had an opportunity to see at first hand a number of castles. On her way to London, for example, she would have passed through Farnham and seen the high and lofty stone fortress which commands a splendid view of the surrounding picturesque landscape. That she was familiar with the castle is borne out by an early reference she makes in 1798, the year she is working on the manuscript of *Northanger Abbey*. When her father is assisting Robert—probably Nanny Liverwart's son—in finding a public inn to manage, word reaches them that one might be empty in Farnham. JA wittily responds: "perhaps Nanny may have the honour of drawing an ale for the Bishop." Her humour is understood when we learn the castle was the residence of the Bishops of Winchester. And between Portsmouth and London is Guilford, a major coaching stop. A later reference, 19 May 1813, shows a conversant JA who with her brother Henry wanted "all our brothers and sisters (*sic*) to be standing with us in the bowling-green." Then as now the well-kept, functional bowling-green affords a splendid view of the remains of a Norman Castle where Henry II had lived in luxury. And in her brother Edward's county, Kent, she knew Chilham, where in 1813, she dined in a house which consists of part of a three-storey keep of a royal castle of rare octagonal plan. Its owner was Mr. Wildman, suitor to her niece, Fanny, and JA found "many Douceurs in being a sort of chaperon" as she was "put on the sofa near the fire and [could] drink as much wine" as she chose.

On the Isle of Wight in JA's Hampshire sits Carisbook, where her favourite monarch Charles I was incarcerated in domestic chambers for almost a year. Much later it provided a residence for the lords, captains and governors of the island; an anachronistic note is of interest in that one such resident was Earl Mountbatten, a tangential descendent through JA's great nephew, Lord Brabourne, son of Fanny Knight. One other Hampshire Castle JA knew intimately was just across from her home in Castle Square, Southampton. Here lived the second Lord Lansdowne in a miniature mock Gothic castle which he had built in 1804, just two years before the Austens' arrival.

If the revisionist theory of *Northanger Abbey* is valid—that is, that JA continued interest in the manuscript during the thirteen years between its 1803 sale and 1816 repurchase and probably added or changed it—her Southampton days may have provided incentive for the tiny Blaize Castle scene. Lord Lansdowne's edifice was described by JA's nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, who frequently visited his grandmother there, as a "fantastic edifice too large for the area and too small to accord with its castellated style." This sham castle may have inspired her to locate nearby to Bath one well-known to the area and thus she settled upon the 1766 Blaize Castle. The contemporary watercolour of Lord Lansdowne's Castle in Southampton Library bears a striking resemblance. Another reason for the

choice—admittedly rather tantalizing to consider—is its architect, Robert Mylne. This Scottish architect, noted for beautiful interiors, had been responsible for remodelling several rooms of Goodnestone Park, the Kentish seat of Sir Brook Bridges, father-in-law to JA's brother Edward. Here in 1796, just two years before writing *Northanger Abbey*, JA had dined and opened a ball in the very rooms Mylne had decorated. Thus the architect, not the artifice, may have been the determinate.

If the revisionist theory is valid, then JA may have fed her imagination on two very famous castles she actually visited in August of 1806 just before taking up residence in Southampton. She and her mother accompanied their cousin the Rev. Thomas Leigh from Gloucestershire to Stoneleigh Abbey. While there, JA and her mother visited the remains of nearby Kenilworth, which, Mrs. Austen writes a daughter-in-law, afforded them "much entertainment" and further confided they "expect still more from the sight of Warwick Castle." Unfortunately for us JA wrote no letter from Stoneleigh and Mrs. Austen's famous letter does not include an account of that visit.

The "thrilling words" that the Tilney residence is not "a house, hall, place, park, court, cottage" but "an abbey" initiate a description so detailed, even map-like, that surely JA had an actual one in mind as General Tilney escorts Catherine on a tour of his home. Most often believed its source is the thirteenth-century Lacock Abbey, located a few miles from Bath in Wiltshire. Immediately upon the dissolution, this wealthy, aristocratic abbey was purchased by William Sharington, who in converting it into a palatial mansion twice the residential space of the convent, altered it in the Gothic mode, the earliest example of such in England. The church, the library, and all the unrequired portions had been totally destroyed. (Was General Tilney's library then like Darcy's a lifetime work?) Lacock's claustral buildings like *Northanger's* were incorporated in the new dwelling. Like General Tilney, the secular grantee had little interest in or respect for the church. Indeed tradition has it that he built the stable court of the stones of the demolished church! Unlike General Tilney's massive kitchen, Lacock's was a simple rectangular building on the west front.

If the revisionist theory is adhered to, JA may have incorporated the features of Stoneleigh Abbey, which, as we have seen, she visited in August 1806. As Lacock was among the last to be dissolved, Stoneleigh was among the first to go, being surrendered to the Crown in 1535. In 1561 JA's ancestors came into possession of it as it lay in a roofless ruin and with Sir Rowland Hill built a grand Elizabethan house which remained substantially unaltered until 1726 when the then Lord Leigh's dream of a magnificent Georgian wing with a western exposure became a reality. The time and western exposure coincide with Grandfather Tilney's improvement. This Abbey, like *Northanger*, is reached along a smooth road not permitting a view of the magnificent grand house and its entrance, like *Northanger's*, is by way of "the old porch," though no longer extant. A hall leads eventually into the library, then the state bed chamber, which JA's mother thought "an alarming apartment just fit for an Heroine." Her response recalls the alarming apartment in *The Italian* or more probably her own daughter's "mysterious apartment." Stoneleigh's magnificent saloon with plasterwork, niches and elegant furniture no doubt struck JA in sharp contrast to the medieval wings. Beyond the cloister and conservatory, now turned into a tea

house, is the abbey's kitchen garden which Mrs. Austen identified as covering four-and-one-half acres, perhaps slightly smaller than the General's.

Two more references to abbeys appear in JA's novels, Donwell, Mr. Knightley's home in *Emma* and a passing line in *Sense and Sensibility*. These latter two references show a JA who respects an abbey for more than Gothic humour. Emma had "an increasing respect" for Donwell and "its comfortable rooms" as "the residence of a family of such true gentility, untainted in blood and understanding" as the Knightleys. And in *Sense and Sensibility* Marianne consoles herself over the remembrance of Willoughby by planning to take long walks with Eleanor to see the Abbeyland and the old ruins of the Priory.

JA's knowledge of the ancient edifice, the abbey, came from her reading, especially of Mrs. Radcliffe and from her own experience. Her native Hampshire has some nineteen religious houses, two quite close to her—a priory at Wherwell near Martha Lloyd's Ibthorpe and Mottisfont Abbey. In Southampton she visited both Netley and Beaulieu abbeys and on her way to London she would have been near Waverley Abbey in Surrey. Of course, for some years she actually lived in one, the twelfth-century Benedictine monastery at Reading, where in the gatehouse she and Cassandra attended school.

Her heroine Catherine's reveries then of castles and abbeys, we can safely conjecture, are surely from the pen of a writer to whom "history, real solemn history" held much interest. Although JA wrote the Prince Regent's Librarian, J. S. Clarke: "I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress," her knowledge of ancient edifices, herein documented, places in perspective the irony of that famous admission.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> References to the novels are to R. W. Chapman's *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, 3rd ed. 5 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1975).
- <sup>2</sup> References to the letters are to Dr. Chapman's *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979).