



Northanger Abbey as Anti-Courtship Novel

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THE PLOT OF JANE AUSTEN'S *Northanger Abbey* would appear to follow the generic conventions of the "courtship novel." The novel begins with Catherine Morland's "entrance into the world" and follows her adventures and state of mind until marriage at the book's close. Many critics would agree: Katherine Sobba Green includes the novel in her chronology of courtship novels published between 1740 and 1824 (164), and William Magee believes that Austen barely changes the conventional structure of the courtship novel in *Northanger Abbey* (199).¹ Other critics may emphasize education in the novel or its literary and social satires, but these themes are presented primarily through the adventures of Austen's comically ordinary "heroine" prior to the life of "perfect happiness" she will lead with Henry Tilney.

In light of a critical consensus, we might be surprised to recall that Austen never uses the word "courtship" and only uses the verb "to court" or its cognates three times in *Northanger Abbey*. In the throes of her Gothic extravagance, Catherine Morland expresses reluctance to "court," or "to lead," Eleanor Tilney into the apartment of her deceased mother. Late in the novel, Eleanor and General Tilney "court" Catherine in ways that call into question their solicitation of her affections. Humiliated by her father's sudden repudiation of

Catherine, Eleanor Tilney exclaims,

“After courting you from the protection of real friends to this—almost double distance from your home, to have you driven out of the house, without the considerations even of decent civility! Dear, dear Catherine, in being the bearer of such a message, I seem guilty myself of all its insult; yet, I trust you will acquit me, for you must have been long enough in this house to see that I am but a nominal mistress of it, that my real power is nothing.” (235)

In this case, Eleanor’s use of “courting” means “to lead,” but there is the added implication of persuasion or temptation. Eleanor suggests that she may have (unwittingly) duped her friend. A few pages later, “court” is used a final time when the narrator describes General Tilney’s responsibility for Catherine’s misery:

She was guilty only of being less rich than he had supposed her to be. Under a mistaken persuasion of her possessions and claims, he had courted her acquaintance in Bath, solicited her company at Northanger, and designed her for his daughter in law. On discovering his error, to turn her from the house seemed the best, though to his feelings an inadequate proof of his resentment towards herself, and his contempt of her family. (244)

Having undergone a “persuasion” of her riches by John Thorpe, the General attempts to persuade Catherine to join his family at the Abbey. Austen’s use of “guilt” in both cases suggests that she condemns the moral economy of courtship-as-persuasion, which amounts to little more than characters duping each other in their supposed self-interest. In the first of the quotations, Eleanor’s explanation exculpates her from the “guilt” she proclaims. She is the “real friend” whom Catherine needs and is in no way responsible for her crude dismissal from the Abbey. In the second case, Catherine’s “guilt” ironically reflects upon the General, whose “feelings” the narrator allows to condemn themselves in the reader’s judgment. In both instances, the courtship of Catherine Morland involves leading her into a physical and social setting she would never have found herself in otherwise. In Samuel Johnson’s definition of “courtship,” this is “the act of soliciting favour.” To solicit is “1. To importune; to intreat. . . . 3. To implore; to ask. 4. To attempt; to try to obtain. [and] 5. To disturb; to disquiet.”

Austen's negative uses of "courtship" apply also to the novel's situations that apply to Johnson's second definition, "The solicitation of a woman to marriage." Courtship is gender defined—only a man can do the courting—and "to court" is a transitive verb, with a male subject acting upon a female object. (In the *Merriam-Webster New Collegiate Dictionary's* twentieth-century intransitive definition of "to court," in contrast, a man and woman together "engage in social activities leading to engagement and marriage.") Marriage is good for Catherine and Henry, but can only be reached through a rejection of conventional patterns of wooing. I argue here that "solicitation of a woman to marriage" can never work to a woman's benefit in *Northanger Abbey*.

Henry Tilney and John Thorpe are the characters who approach Catherine romantically. John Thorpe is a dolt whose attempts at persuasion are patently hypocritical, to the reader if not to Catherine herself. Henry Tilney is a skilled ironist who tries to speak to Catherine with self-conscious irony. When John Thorpe woos Catherine, he deploys language unself-consciously but with self-interest in mind. His actions represent courtship-as-solicitation, which we might call "rhetorical" or persuasive courtship. Yet it is Henry Tilney's courtship of Catherine that is the more conventional of the two. Henry's clumsy and self-defeating conversational sallies more prevent than promote the happy ending of the novel with the uniting of the two characters. Austen turns the tables on patterns of courtship through her presentation of Catherine's ironic winning of Henry's sincere admiration. Ultimately, Catherine attracts Henry through a mute courtship that eschews language.

In *Northanger Abbey* linguistic persuasion is suspect. The novel is caught in a bind. Language is by its nature rhetorical. We speak to others for our own interests, whether to direct others or to acquire information. By focusing on Catherine's unintentional effect upon Henry, Austen presents a contradictory "disinterested courtship" that preserves the comic plot of the novel while allowing for both the novel's social satire and its romantic idealism. In *Northanger Abbey* the world is made up of hypocrites who use language to deceive themselves and others for the sake of interest. At the same time, however, Austen presents us with Catherine and Henry, flawed characters who come together by refusing to act simply in their own interest. They

are “disinterested”: “Unbiased by personal interest; free from self-seeking.”² “Solicitation” and “disinterestedness” are therefore in direct contradiction. The novel masks this contradiction by giving Henry and Catherine the ability to come together without consciously soliciting each other’s hand in marriage.

This “disinterested courtship” matches the changing social conventions of wooing and marriage in early-nineteenth-century England. Literary critic Catherine Bates has explored the semantic change of the words “courtship” and “to court” from the sixteenth century on, showing connections between the aristocratic origins of the word and the common meanings involving bourgeois romantic love and marriage that have come to dominate usage. In the sixteenth century, Bates argues, in England as well as France and Italy, the verb “to court” began to signify the wooing of women as well as the rhetorical practices of courtiers. Although usually a form of specious rhetoric, distrusted by writers who associated it with seduction rather than love, enough positive usage of the word “to court” along with the English neologism “courtship” influenced its shift in meaning in the eighteenth century (21-51).³

Northanger Abbey attacks the persistent aristocratic usage of “courtship” through Captain Tilney’s wooing of Isabella Thorpe.⁴ The novel shows the transformed bourgeois practice of “courtship” that John Thorpe unsuccessfully adopts in his approaches to Catherine. Henry’s own courtship of Catherine mixes satiric wit with gracious manners, but neither its aristocratic nor bourgeois aspects can lead to true union with Catherine. In *Northanger Abbey* a successful marriage comes about in spite of courtship rather than as the predictable end result of courtship. The only way for characters to achieve proper marriage is for them to become novelists in the realistic rather than the Gothic mode, to perceive character behind the mask of rhetoric. The novel ultimately transforms Catherine and Henry from characters who are the objects of satire to genuine heroes of a novel. Austen manipulates the form of the novel as she inherited it in the early nineteenth century just as she presents a new kind of “anti-courtship.” The characters themselves come to see the world with a novelist’s subtlety. Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney begin their acquaintance as bad writers, Catherine in the Gothic mode and Henry as the bourgeois descendant of the aristocratic court wit. She imposes a false vision on

circumstance; he prefers verbal ability to close and accurate observation. By the end of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine and Henry represent the “institution” of the novel as much as they do the institution of bourgeois marriage. The novel, like modern conceptions of marriage, turns the idea of courtship on its head, reconstructing it as simultaneously prudent and ecstatic. *Northanger Abbey* depicts a new kind of courtship—an anti-courtship—that rejects both persuasion and sentimentalism in favor of a good sense expressed in opposition to false flirtation. Somehow—through the magic of Austen’s writing rather than strict logic—this comes across as “realistic.”

John Thorpe’s courtship of Catherine illustrates the wrong way of turning the originally aristocratic form of “courtship” to middle-class ends. He employs a rhetoric of disinterestedness, claiming that he wishes only for mutual happiness, for the “companionate marriage” that social historians have linked with changing eighteenth-century mores. However, Thorpe’s disinterestedness is *merely* rhetorical; for Austen a true disinterestedness must be evacuated of persuasion. Catherine first meets John Thorpe in Bath when she is with Isabella and he is with Catherine’s brother James. Catherine is primarily occupied by the satisfaction she feels on seeing her brother after an absence. The narrator tells us that if Catherine “had been more expert in the developement of other people’s feelings, and less simply engrossed by her own” (45), she would have noticed James’s interest in her new friend Isabella. As a character trait, Catherine’s self-absorption is of a piece with her projection of Gothic fantasies onto the world, a problem that much of the novel seeks to purge from her. Catherine’s self-absorption has a positive side, too. It creates a barrier between Catherine and the rest of the self-interested world. She cannot understand Thorpe’s persuasive affectation of disinterest.

In John Thorpe’s first meeting with Catherine, the narrator directly attacks him through literary parody. He is the sentimental hero of the eighteenth-century novel presented as a booby: “[Catherine] directly received the amends that were her due; for while he slightly and carelessly touched the hand of Isabella, on her he bestowed a whole scrape and half a short bow” (45). Thorpe “was a stout young man of middling height, who, with a plain face and ungraceful form, seemed fearful of being too handsome unless he wore the dress of a groom, and too much like a gentleman unless he were easy where he

ought to be civil, and impudent where he might be allowed to be easy” (45). To an observer, his manners are not proper for his social class. Yet, who is the proper observer? To whom does John Thorpe “seem” so lamentably incorrect? Surely not Catherine, who remains comically oblivious to everything John Thorpe says. The other characters at least pretend not to understand Thorpe, Isabella, and General Tilney. The only party understanding these characters’ hypocrisy is the informed reader, who understands the social conventions of the world and the literary conventions of the novel with the subtlety of the narrator.

Above all, Catherine does not comprehend even that John Thorpe is courting her! The most amusing example of this, itself a parody of stock moments of sentimental *éclaircissement*, occurs at the receipt of James Morland’s letter pledging himself to Isabella. John Thorpe confronts Catherine and plays the role of the wistful lover on parting. “Without appearing to hear her, he walked to a window, fidgetted about, hummed a tune, and seemed wholly self-occupied” (122). Again, “appearing” and “seeming” are clues to an incongruity of form and meaning. He can “seem self-occupied” only to those who understand the stock rhetoric: the reader rather than Catherine. Catherine remains hilariously untouched by Thorpe’s acting. Finally he attempts to push Catherine into recognition by referring to their siblings’ impending nuptials:

“And then you know”—twisting himself about and forcing a foolish laugh—“I say, then you know, we may try the truth of this same old song.”

“May we?—but I never sing. Well, I wish you a good journey. I dine with Miss Tilney to-day, and must now be going home.” (123)

Thorpe feels he must be more explicit. He attempts to solicit Catherine’s affections through a show of disinterestedness:

“My notion of things is simple enough. Let me only have the girl I like, say I, with a comfortable house over my head, and what care I for all the rest? Fortune is nothing. I am assured of a good income of my own, and if she had not a penny, why so much the better.” (124)

Catherine understands the meaning of the words, but because she does not apply them to her immediate situation, she cannot under-

stand how they function rhetorically. She echoes them, changing their meaning entirely by virtue of her different speaking position. It is not the words themselves, but their underlying meaning to which Catherine (and the novel) adhere:

“Very true. I think like you there. If there is a good fortune on one side, there can be no occasion for any on the other. No matter which has it, so that there is enough. I hate the idea of one great fortune looking out for another. And to marry for money I think the wickedest thing in existence.” (124)

Henry Tilney’s initial courtship of Catherine is little better, although it is very different. If John Thorpe’s stumbling demeanor represents Austen’s satire on the sentimental hypocrite, Henry’s self-indulgent wit provides Austen with the chance to mock aristocratic courtship.⁵ From his introduction to Catherine through most of her visit to Northanger Abbey, Henry plays the courtier with Catherine. He does so by adopting a stance similar to the narrator’s: he displays his seemingly full understanding of rhetorical conventions by deploying those conventions with an ironic self-consciousness. Henry has, at first, only the narrator’s verbal skill. He lacks the genuine feeling that will provide substance to a relationship with Catherine and that will give the novel its emotional force. For example, in his first conversation with Catherine, he pretends to know what Catherine will write about him in her journal. “Yes, I know exactly what you will say: Friday, went to the Lower Rooms; wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings...” (26). In this case, Henry’s flirtation is funny. When Catherine protests that she might keep no journal whatsoever, Henry expresses amazement that she could be any different from all the young women at Bath, and he allows himself a few sexist comments on the talents of female letter writers. Henry’s presumption is funny here, but it acquires a nasty edge when he makes real mistakes, including not taking the flirtation of Isabella and Captain Tilney seriously. His linguistic self-consciousness, and self-confidence, adheres to outdated standards of behavior. Like a courtly wit, he courts for the sake of his wit alone.

Henry requires education as much as Catherine does. To that end, the novel provides moments of stress in which Catherine’s humanity can predominate over her traits of ludicrous heroine-ism. At

these points in the novel, Catherine unconsciously reforms—and courts—Henry. The most important of these moments comes with Catherine's extreme humiliation after Henry guesses at her suspicions of murder at Northanger Abbey: "The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened.... She hated herself more than she could express" (199). Catherine is not the only person brought to a new level of understanding at this point in the novel. Henry had been responsible for her awakening through his ridicule of Catherine (a ridicule rendered problematical by its reference to England's "network of voluntary spies" [198] among other things).⁶ Catherine's moment of self-understanding has occurred before receiving her brother's shocking letter. The novel is not at this point doubling up on its abuse of Catherine. The scene after receiving the letter represents less a "learning experience" for Catherine than an opportunity for her latent depth of character to come through. She woos Henry without employing persuasive language.

Henry "earnestly" watches her read the letter and observes her involuntary physical responses: to him and Eleanor, "her distress was visible" (203). Catherine expresses concern for her brother. Henry responds with sincerity: "To have so kind-hearted, so affectionate a sister," replied Henry warmly, 'must be a comfort to him under any distress'" (204). Catherine is gaining the interest of Henry's heart through her disinterestedness. Henry asks to look at the letter, and Catherine hesitates, blushing at the thought of James's last line, which had warned her to "beware how you give your heart" (202). The blush provides a non-linguistic sign of Catherine's affection. Unintended, the true blush cannot be guilty of attempted persuasion; at the same time, the blush indicates Catherine's consciousness that her brother's line might apply to herself, giving the initial affection to which Henry's "gratitude" is the proper response. The chapter concludes with Henry's warmest declaration in favor of Catherine: "You feel, as you always do, what is most to the credit of human nature. Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves" (207).

Without explicit commentary, we might suspect that Henry speaks ironically here. Giving credit to "human nature," after all, is not always the right choice in *Northanger Abbey*. Moreover, earlier in this intense and important conversation, Henry had used irony in a potentially cruel manner. When Catherine laments that never in her life had

she been so deceived, Henry quips, “Among all the great variety that you have known and studied” (206). After this he falls back into the old pattern of anticipating Catherine’s responses by pretending to see her as a conventionally silly young lady. He exaggerates ludicrously what she must feel upon losing her close bosom friend. Catherine does not consciously rebuke Henry for his insensibility. Instead she expresses her feelings with sincerity “after a few moments’ reflection” (207). Catherine’s reasoned comments provide a crucial moment of education for Henry. He smugly prompts her after anticipating a stock sentimental response with “You feel all this”:

“No,” said Catherine, after a few moments’ reflection, “I do not—ought I? To say the truth, though I am hurt and grieved that I cannot still love her, that I am never to hear from her, perhaps never to see her again, I do not feel so very, very much afflicted as one would have thought.”

Henry is clearly “one” whose presumptions of affliction are refuted. His final words are genuine rather than ironic. Catherine’s good nature has defeated the courtly wit of Henry. She has persuaded Henry with the negation of rhetoric.

Later, the narrator attributes Henry’s affection for Catherine to “gratitude”:

She was assured of his affection; and that heart was solicited, which, perhaps, they pretty equally knew was already entirely his own; for, though Henry was now sincerely attached to her, though he felt and delighted in all the excellencies of her character and truly loved her society, I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of a heroine’s dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own. (243)

In this passage the literary satire of *Northanger Abbey* and its social concerns mingle explicitly. She admires “sincere” feelings and attacks the literary genre of “romance” at the same time, suggesting that she can promote proper human relationships only through attacking bad literary conventions. *Pride and Prejudice* contains its own trace of this

passage in its explanation of Elizabeth's turnabout in her assessment of Mr. Darcy.

If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth's change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object... nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had been given somewhat of a trial to the latter method... and that its ill-success might perhaps authorise her to seek the other, less interesting mode of attachment.
(279)

Again, the positive and responsible feelings experienced by characters we have come to know over the course of the novel are balanced against literary conventions ("what is so often described"). In *Pride and Prejudice* the balance lies on the side of the characters' psychologies; Elizabeth has just undergone very intense moments in the first chapters of volume 3 of the novel. In *Northanger Abbey* the balance lies on the side of the literary parody and social satire. The narrator's famous comments in praise of the novel in volume 1, chapter 5, explicitly oppose the genre to the often sneering writings of Pope, Prior, and Sterne, in a way providing commentary on Catherine's novelistic reformation of Henry's self-indulgent wit. In common life, where probability and rectitude should reside, the novel establishes more proper authority than courtly wit or Gothic romance. Yet it must avoid seeming to persuade us of its goals since it so strongly attacks persuasion. In an odd way, Austen combines conventions of social satire and the realistic novel to expressive ends. If we do not already agree with the novel, we will not be changed by it, nor will we be able to understand it. The anti-courtship novel suggests that readers share the beliefs and feelings of the narrator before entering into its world. Like Catherine and Henry, however, we can try to become more like novelists, but we will never attain the omniscience and control of the narrator. *Northanger Abbey* tells a true story of courtship only by insisting that we can never find our mates by ourselves.

NOTES

1. In her first completed novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen took over the courtship and marriage plot from her feminine predecessors and used it as she found it.
2. OED, s.v. "disinterested." Common parlance now uses "disinterested" as a synonym for "uninterested," but in Austen's time the two words were distinct.
3. Bates develops her argument in a book-length study of courtship in the Renaissance in *The Rhetoric of Courtship in Elizabethan Language and Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992).
4. In this way the novel can be seen slyly to criticize late-eighteenth-century defenses of chivalry such as Burke's famous passionate defense in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.
5. In this essay I must set aside the interesting issue of Isabella Thorpe's inappropriate female courtships of Catherine Morland, James Morland, and Captain Tilney.
6. Such moments inform the most successful, and now common, arguments that Henry is a villain rather than a hero in *Northanger Abbey*.

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