



Clothing the
Thought in the Word:
The Speakers
of *Northanger Abbey*

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I'D LIKE YOU TO LISTEN in on the following verbal exchange. To this expert readership, it will sound familiar, but not quite right.

"I consider clothing as an emblem of language. The principal uses of each are to display the body or the thought to best advantage, or effectively to disguise and deceive. And those who do not chuse to dress elegantly or to speak eloquently, have no business with the clothing or language of their neighbours."

"But they are such very different things!—"

"That you think they cannot be compared together."

"To be sure not. Clothing is pelisses and bonnets and jackets and stocks. But language is just words and noise, and when you have stopped talking it isn't there."

"And such is your definition of dress and articulation. Taken in that light, certainly, their resemblance is not striking; but I think I could place them in such a view..."

(Compare *Northanger Abbey* 76-77)

But rather than continuing to imitate Henry Tilney, I turn to earlier writers Jane Austen knew to show that the analogy of dress with language is a familiar one. "What are *words* but the *body* and *dress* of thought?" asks Richardson's *Clarissa* (543). "The thought is every-

where exactly clothed by the expression,” writes Fielding’s Parson Tickletext of *Shamela*, “and becomes its dress as *roundly* and as close as Pamela her country habit” (304). Not long after Austen’s time, the Victorian prophet Thomas Carlyle developed the analogy into a whole philosophy in *Sartor Resartus*. “Language is called the Garment of Thought,” he writes; “however, it should rather be, Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body, of Thought.” In fact, for Carlyle clothing is a metaphor for the whole material world: “The whole External Universe and what it holds is but clothing, and the essence of all Science lies in the PHILOSOPHY OF CLOTHES” (73-74).

It may seem a far cry from Carlyle’s stirring claims to Mrs. Allen of *Northanger Abbey*, but Mrs. Allen would no doubt approve of the sentiment, if she could pay attention to it for long enough. For Mrs. Allen, chaperone and first mentor to our heroine, clothes virtually *are* the world, or all of it that she finds interesting or significant. It is Mrs. Allen who introduces the prominent motif of clothing in this novel. And Henry Tilney, hero and second mentor to the heroine, develops the theme of language. What I propose to explore here is the relation of these two prominent strands of the novel’s interest.

Catherine Morland is the most unawakened and unformed of the heroines of Austen’s maturity; and both dress and language play a role in identity formation. Let me quote one more authority, Henry James’s Madame Merle, and then I’ll get back to Austen.

“What shall we call our ‘self’? [asks Madame Merle]. Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into every thing that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear.”

Mrs. Allen would certainly approve of that bit. But Madame Merle continues,

“One’s self—for other people—is one’s expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive” (172-73).

Nobody knows that better than Jane Austen, who, like Madame Merle, has “a great respect for *things*,” and who makes Donwell Abbey express Mr. Knightley and the books she reads express Catherine. But what Madame Merle leaves out—perhaps because the proposition is

too obvious—is that one’s language expresses one—or ought to—more fully and directly than all the rest. And that of course is where Tilney can most assist Catherine in expressing and indeed discovering her self. It’s worth noting, too, that the champion of dress in this novel is female, the champion of language, male.

Jane Austen doesn’t condemn Mrs. Allen for her consuming interest in dress, but for the fact that she’s interested in nothing else. Her ruling “passion” for dress, in fact, makes her in one respect a suitable person to launch Catherine in society: Catherine is properly fitted out during her first three or four days in Bath, so that when she does appear publicly she “appear[s] to much advantage,” as Henry Tilney notes (20, 26). But a notable strand of the comedy in *Northanger Abbey* concerns the way in which Mrs. Allen can boil down all of experience and ethics to a matter of who is wearing what, or preferably what she is wearing herself. Is it proper for a young girl to travel in an open carriage with a young man? (an important question for a chaperone), receives the answer, “Open carriages are nasty things. A clean gown is not five minutes wear in them” (104). Should a girl be obedient? “Young people *will* be young people,” responds Mrs. Allen wisely. “You know I wanted you...not to buy that sprigged muslin, but you would” (105). Even on her favorite subject Mrs. Allen focusses on the trivial and material aspects: price, washability, durability. She summons visitors “to guess the price and weigh the merits of a new muff and tippet” (51). But we never hear her elaborate from the qualities of one muff and tippet to consider the social significance of muffs and tippets in general, or enlarge on the aesthetic effect of an ensemble, or address the large subject of fashion in culture. Her passion doesn’t open her mind to large related issues or prompt her to analogical thinking. Rather, it turns her mind—what there is of it—in ever-decreasing circles.

We learn almost as much about Mrs. Allen’s habits in speech as her habits in dress. Her “vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking were such, that as she never talked a great deal, so she could never be entirely silent” (60). Her “trifling turn of mind” (20) means that she produces a continuous trickle of trivia. A situation in which the best entertainment is to call on Mrs. Allen, as Tilney notes, is a daunting “picture of intellectual poverty” (79).

The exclusive company of Mrs. Allen would drive most of us to

drink, but we feel quite warmly toward Catherine. Still, it's worth noting some of the strong parallels between the chaperone and her charge. Mrs. Allen takes her opinions, such as they are, from Mr. Allen; and Catherine is "little...in the habit of judging for her self" (66). Mrs. Allen can't notice or respond to a significant look, for "not being at all in the habit of conveying any expression herself by a look, [she] was not aware of its being ever intended by any body else" (61). Catherine is similarly anchored in her own practice and unawakened to other people's: As Tilney tells her, "'With you, it is not, How is such a one likely to be influenced?...—but, how should I be influenced...?'" (132). Her naiveté may be charming, especially since she is young. But unless she wakes up and pays attention, it is all too likely that at fifty she'll be a clone of Mrs. Allen: a daunting prospect.

Isabella is Catherine's next role model, and a more dangerous one still. Here the preoccupation with dress continues as a constituent of identity. Isabella's disastrously short attention span is marked by her habit of following up some serious and emphatic pronouncement with an anticlimactic reference to clothing. "'The very first day that Morland came to us...—the very first moment I beheld him—my heart was irrecoverably gone. I remember I wore my yellow gown, with my hair done up in braids'" (118). Or, "'He is the only man I ever did or could love, and I trust you will convince him of it. The spring fashions are partly down; and the hats the most frightful you can imagine'" (216). Catherine must ultimately learn to recognize the "strain of shallow artifice": the shallowness signalled by the tendency to level love with garments, the serious with the trivial; the artifice, by her constant practice of verbal deception.

In Isabella, Austen extends her motif of clothing to comprehend dress as disguise. Isabella's "resolute stilishness" (55) includes a good deal of deceptive self-presentation. She is always describing herself and constructing an identity for show that is far from matching the self that emerges from her practice. Compare these pieces of self-presentation with the Isabella we have come to know by the end. "'There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends'" (40). "'I make it a rule never to mind what [the men] say'" (42). "'For myself, it is nothing; I never think of myself'" (136). Her mother gushes over her, "'We perfectly see into your heart. You have no disguise'" (136). Ha ha!

Isabella practices a “resolute stilishness” in her speech as in her dress. The first words we hear her speak, “How excessively like her brother Miss Morland is!” bear some analysis (32). To begin with, they are exclamatory, and she is always striving for attention by overemphasis. Her slangy misuse of “excessively” makes it merely an intensifier that has nothing to do with excess. She claims it is Catherine’s striking and romantic likeness to her brother that catches her attention, when the context makes it clear she has actually latched onto the name. The reference to physical likeness shows her reaching for an intimacy for ulterior motives, as she plans to catch James through his sister.

Although Isabella is always parading her individuality and originality, there is something drearily predictable in everything she says. “Had I the command of millions,” she tells Catherine, “were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice.” The narrator comments drily, “This charming sentiment, recommended as much by sense as novelty, gave Catherine a most pleasing remembrance of all the heroines of her acquaintance” (119). To snatch a sartorial metaphor from another part of the novel, Isabella talks “in threadbare strains” (37).

One recurring threadbare strain in Isabella’s discourse is her commentary on “the men”—usually with the definite article attached: “The men think us incapable of real friendship” (40); “The men take notice of that” (42); “You men have none of you any hearts” (147). She generalizes and essentializes them as a way of flirting. She relates to men largely as a sex, rather than as individuals, and thus drives a wedge between the sexes, emphasizing her own femaleness by abusing and courting their maleness.

Unlike the dozy Mrs. Allen, however, Isabella has a mind as sharp as a calculator constantly at work, and she is occasionally capable of some shrewd ploys in the language of implication. When Catherine excuses herself from marrying John Thorpe and reassures her “we shall still be sisters,” Isabella responds, with a blush, “Yes, yes, . . . there are more ways than one of our being sisters” (145). She is way ahead of Catherine, and planning on dropping James and catching Captain Tilney instead, brother to Catherine’s Henry. It’s a moment when Catherine, were she more attuned to the subtleties of language, might learn a good deal. But she isn’t, and she doesn’t.

The most we hear of John Thorpe's taste in clothes is that "he seemed fearful of being too handsome unless he wore the dress of a groom" (45), but it is enough to inform us that he takes no pains to dress appropriately, to fit his appearance, or his words either, to station or situation. In speech he shares Isabella's habit of overemphasis for effect, but with far less tact. He has no notion, as Isabella might say, of adapting his language to his interlocutor, but deluges Catherine at first meeting with his exclusively male and macho concerns. It's clear he wants everything and everyone to be "well hung" (46). Like his sister, he widens the distance between men and women, for he takes no pains to pay attention to anyone outside himself and his male concerns.

His talk is aggressive and browbeating, precluding any opportunity for civil exchange and taking advantage of Catherine's "youthful female mind, fearful of hazarding an opinion of its own in opposition to that of a self assured man" (48). When she ventures timidly to introduce a new subject and asks him if he has read *Udolpho*, she has about as much chance of civil exchange with him as a daisy confronted by a steamroller. "Udolpho! Oh, Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do." Catherine is "humbled and ashamed" (48).

It is John Thorpe's speech practice that allows Jane Austen to define her high standards for what qualifies as "conversation" (McMaster 119-21). When he drives Catherine in his gig to Claverton Down, we hear that "all the rest of his conversation, or rather talk, began and ended with himself and his own concerns" (66). To *converse*, in Johnson's definition, is "to convey thoughts reciprocally in talk." But there is a severe shortage of reciprocity in any talk of Thorpe's. Rather than advancing a subject by exchange and enlargement, as in "conversation" properly understood, his talk is circular, from himself to himself, and goes nowhere.

He abuses language even in its basic function of communicating information. So intent is he on bolstering his own ego and monopolizing attention by false emphasis that the truth or otherwise of any given statement barely concerns him. James's gig, in the course of two speeches, metamorphoses from "the most devilish little rickety business" that can't be expected to last two miles to a vehicle "safe enough" to drive "to York and back again without losing a nail" (65). Such are the "idle assertions and impudent falsehoods" of a "rattle" (65).

In the same way that Catherine is at a loss “to reconcile two such different accounts of the same thing” in her dealings with John Thorpe, she is staggered by General Tilney’s propensity to “say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while” (211). And different as are Thorpe’s and the General’s styles of speech, there is a rich appropriateness in the fact that one language-abuser becomes the dupe of the other. By their opposed crudity and intricacy in deceptive language, she has the chance to learn, by negative example, the necessity of reading beyond surface meaning, of assessing character and profession according to patterns different from her own simple thought processes.

Isabella, John Thorpe, and the General all use language as disguise. They dress their thoughts as for a masquerade, in an outfit more or less elaborate, a mask more or less intended to be penetrated. The masquerade is, as it were, contractual disguise, and the false identity is often meant to be penetrated. It works best when viewer and viewed alike assume other identities. Literal-minded Catherine, who “could not tell a falsehood even to please Isabella” (67), can’t enter into the masquerade contract, and spoils the routine.¹

Henry Tilney’s talk likewise has an ambiguous relation with truth and reality: he too is no literalist, and he too puzzles Catherine by his verbal shifts. But his talk may be called “fancy dress” rather than masquerade, a less formal and more playful kind of shape-shifting, which invites participation rather than counter-disguise from the viewer.

I turn from John Thorpe’s speech to Henry Tilney’s with almost as much relief as Catherine could herself, and in discussing Tilney’s speech practices, I shall also be discussing Catherine’s, and the ways his practices affect hers.

Where Thorpe at their first meeting belabors Catherine with boasts about the speed of his horse and his own discernment in buying it, Tilney, after some preliminary “chat,” turns the spotlight on speech itself by parodying the standard exchange in a ballroom. He is like Elizabeth Bennet, another highly qualified conversationalist, who similarly goes in for parody of the hackneyed mode when she talks to Darcy about taking “turns” in speaking (91).

Tilney first gives Catherine due warning that he “will begin directly” with the ritual catechism of a first meeting in Bath; then,

forming his features into a set smile, and affectedly softening his voice, he added, with a simpering air,

“Have you been long in Bath, madam?”

“About a week, sir,” replied Catherine, trying not to laugh.

“Really!” with affected astonishment.

“Why should you be surprized, sir?”

“Why, indeed!” said he, in his natural tone—“but some emotion must appear to be raised by your reply, and surprize is more easily assumed, and not less reasonable than any other....Now I must give one smirk, and then we may be rational again.”

Catherine turned away her head, not knowing whether she might venture to laugh. (26)

At the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, we hear that Darcy must “learn to be laught at” (371); and here at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine must learn when she may venture to laugh: propitious intimations both.

When two virtual strangers meet on the dance floor, there are inevitably certain preliminaries to wade through before one can achieve a comfortable relation; and Tilney and Elizabeth both recognize the large constituent of routine in social converse. But both are able to cut through those preliminaries, and achieve lightness and wit, by turning them into play. They leave plodding literalness behind, and introduce fanciful variations, in which the partner is invited to participate. They dance with their words as well as their feet.

Catherine is not practiced in verbal dancing: “Her own family,” we hear, “were plain matter-of-fact people, who seldom aimed at wit of any kind; her father, at the utmost, being contented with a pun, and her mother with a proverb” (65-66). Compared with the rattle John Thorpe, these are virtues. But to enlarge her language, and with it her consciousness and her very life, she needs to experience language not just as literal communication, but as a supple instrument capable of varying relations to reality. Henry expands her inheritance by teaching her irony, speech as play, and pleasure in verbal formulations.

Those who object to Tilney as male mentor, or as a Mr. Bennet in the making, certainly have a point. In this first conversation, as in others, he does *lead* Catherine, and in the process he displays his own

wit and prowess. But they're on the dance floor, after all; and even her best friends would admit that Catherine often *needs* to be led.

In contrast with Thorpe's exclusionary choice of subject and browbeating tactics, Tilney constantly involves Catherine in his speech, draws her in, and draws out her responses. Since she's not yet ready to converse herself, he arranges a witty exchange of roles, as he fancifully composes her journal entry: he offers her, first, a version of how she appears in his eyes—"wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings—plain black shoes—appeared to much advantage"; and then of how he appears in hers: "was strangely harassed by a queer, half-witted man, who...distressed me by his nonsense" (26). His playful appropriation of her voice beguiles her into participation. Tilney leads the conversation, he plays, he entertains. And though the performance is largely on his side, he does succeed in involving her. At first her responses are so brief as to be fragmentary: "Never, sir?... 'Yes, sir, on Wednesday.'... 'If you please.'" Soon she manages a sentence: "But, perhaps, I keep no journal"—the "perhaps" signalling that she is beginning to enter into the spirit of the game. Next, on the subject of ladies' letter-writing, she volunteers two sentences, both with subordinate clauses, no less. And at last she is stimulated into spirited reaction, and even some subtlety of articulation: "Upon my word! I need not have been afraid of disclaiming the compliment. You do not think too highly of us in that way" (27). Although this is only their first exchange, and Catherine is clearly unpracticed, it still deserves the name of "conversation." Henry and Catherine have advanced a subject by exchange.

There is a sense in which Catherine plays Galatea to Tilney's Pygmalion. Indeed, Tilney might well agree with Henry Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*: "You have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates... soul from soul" (256).

Such an enterprise of taking over another person's identity certainly smacks of hubris, and Henry Higgins is duly punished for his arrogance in his project. *Our* Henry, Tilney, being not so ambitious, is not so guilty. He doesn't change, nor try to change, Catherine's identity. For one thing, though she is untutored and "teachable," she has an engagingly stable personality that goes with her refreshing honesty;

for another, he likes the human being she already is. But he does undertake to extend her mind by improving her mental vocabulary, to extend her experience by sharpening her consciousness and dressing up her thought.

His actual corrections of her language—getting on her case for misuse of words like “nice,” “amazingly” (107), “torment” (109), “faithfully” (195–96), and “seriously” (211)—though useful in raising her consciousness about exact expression, are not his major contribution. These are “but the trappings and the suits” of his more far-reaching concern for her dim awareness, her unreflecting acceptance of everything and everybody and their pronouncements.

Does Catherine *need* Tilney’s instructions? He is certainly not the infallible authority she believes him to be, and there is plenty of irony at his expense. On some matters, such as the judgment of his father, she is more right than he is. We know he is attracted by her “uninformed mind” because it gives her the ability “of administering to the vanity of others” (110)—that is, *his* vanity. Nevertheless, I argue that Catherine *does* need Tilney, and precisely in this area of refining her own speech and extending her understanding of others’. One measure of her need is her brother James, brought up in the same unsophisticated, matter-of-fact family speech practices. Near the end of the novel, he is still unawakened: “I can never expect to know such another woman” as Isabella, he laments; and he still believes in John Thorpe’s “honest heart” (202)! Thanks in part to Henry, Catherine has advanced beyond such naiveté of assessment, and without the benefit of an Oxford education too.

“For much of *Northanger Abbey* Catherine behaves like someone drugged or half-asleep,” writes Terry Castle, in her excellent introduction to the World’s Classics edition, and she reminds us how often we hear of “Catherine going to bed and falling into a child-like slumber” (xvii–xviii). Catherine is often unawake, unaware, dozy, dreamy. In fact, if I may introduce a sartorial simile of my own, she is often like the girl in that series of advertisements that some may remember who confesses, alongside an explicit picture, “I dreamed I went to the ball in my Maidenform bra.” Her lack of thought and the words to dress it in means she is inadequately and inappropriately dressed for the social occasions she cares to attend.

Consider, for instance, the ways in which she fails to cope in cer-

tain situations where she would prefer to pass with credit: a girl, especially in Jane Austen's time, would want to guard the secret of whom she loves until she is ready to share it with a chosen confidante, but Catherine doesn't know how to cover up decently. "How well your brother dances!" she exclaims to Eleanor Tilney; and after that first meeting "they parted—on Miss Tilney's side with some knowledge of her new acquaintance's feelings, and on Catherine's, without the smallest consciousness of having explained them" (73). She spills all her beans without even knowing she has done so.

She is so unawakened, and so uninstructed about articulating herself, that there's a sense in which her own experience doesn't belong to her. Most women, I believe, would want to know when a man is proposing to her, even if she has no intention of accepting him. But Catherine is oblivious to John Thorpe's clumsy courtship:

"Going to one wedding brings on another' [he quotes].... 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." (123)

Wake up, Catherine!—one feels like saying. To leave a courting John Thorpe with "the undivided consciousness of his own happy address, and her explicit encouragement," is to administer a boost to his vanity, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid (124, 110-11).

A last instance of Catherine's inadequate preparation:

A girl in love would want to be alert to what the man she's in love with is saying about her, in her presence, to his sister. But Catherine, still only half awake, lets this conversation proceed without ever grasping that it refers to her. Henry and Eleanor Tilney are discussing the behavior of Isabella, who has jilted Catherine's brother for theirs.

"Prepare for your sister-in-law, Eleanor, and such a sister-in-law as you must delight in!—Open, candid, artless, guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise."

"Such a sister-in-law, Henry, I should delight in," said Eleanor, with a smile. (206)

Catherine hears every word, but simply assumes she is hearing

Henry's heavily ironic description of the scheming Isabella. She doesn't understand, as Eleanor does, his fancy verbal footwork: his description works in both senses, both as an ironic description of Isabella and as a literal description of Catherine. Brother and sister, alert to the refinements of language and its potential for dressing thought in varied garb, can enjoy each other's wit and play of mind. Catherine, still on the sidelines of this verbal game, doesn't even know it's going on.

Only half awake, and insufficiently or improperly dressed, she is constantly subject to humiliation; even if she is often mercifully unaware of it, she is still losing out on the manifold pleasures that Henry and Eleanor enjoy in their speech. Henry, with his patient training and attention, awakens her, not only to her literal-minded reading of Gothic fiction, but to her simplistic reading of others' speech. He also brings her to understand and sometimes to participate in the wide-ranging *pleasure* of verbal exchange that is more than simply the communication of "matter of fact." And, as he tells her, "it is well to have as many holds upon happiness as possible" (174).

It seems ungenerous to focus on what's wrong with Catherine and what she has to learn since there is so much that is *right* about her, and we have so much reason to like her as she is. She *feels* right: her "fresh feelings of every kind" are what we can rejoice in, as Henry does. And she is capable of *thinking* right too, when she thinks at all. These are innate qualities, already part of her makeup. But as Madame Merle reminds us, "One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self." And Catherine has far to go in the full articulation of her self for other people, as well as in developing her own consciousness.

A telling moment occurs when Catherine greets her brother after she has heard of his engagement to her friend: "Catherine wished to congratulate him, but knew not what to say, and her eloquence was only in her eyes. From them however the eight parts of speech shone out most expressively" (120). It is for Henry Tilney to help her to put those eight parts of speech to work in her voice as well as her eyes.

To return, then, to some of the ways Tilney enlarges Catherine's consciousness as he refines her language: besides providing her with entertaining examples of speech as play, he is "nice"—in the correct sense—in making fine distinctions. Catherine is indignant to see Captain Tilney flirt with Isabella, and she complains about it to Henry. "Is it my brother's attentions to Miss Thorpe, or Miss Thorpe's

admission of them, that gives the pain?" he asks. Catherine is not yet capable of such fine discrimination, and she replies unthinkingly, "Is it not the same thing?" (151). She is like today's unthinking teenager who shrugs, "Whatever!" Henry *could* here enter into a heavy explanation of the difference, but instead he responds, "I think Mr. Morland would acknowledge a difference." This makes Catherine stretch her mind to imagine her brother's feelings, and *then* she understands: "Catherine blushed for her friend" (151). His appeal to her to exert her own mind, rather than submit to his authority, is crucial to the process. "Consult your own understanding," he urges her, when he finds her in pursuit of Gothic extravagances (197).

Since Catherine is unthinking and under-clothed, she is often comically available for others to dress up in some new outfit of their own construction. She is all too apt to accept these artificial constructions: when the General admires "the elasticity of her walk," she sees herself "walking... with great elasticity, though she had never thought of it before" (103); when Isabella accuses her of being "arch," she looks for an opportunity to be so (117, 143). The narrator throughout is humorously trying to drape her in the shining robes of a heroine, and sure enough, Catherine makes her attempt at becoming an Emily St. Aubert, with disastrous consequences. In the face of all these artificial deckings-out, which Catherine accepts partly because of her own lack of control in verbal constructions, it is satisfactory to find an occasion late in the novel when she is offered a fancy dress and refuses it. She has at last learned from her brother of Isabella's infidelity. And Henry offers a ready-made outfit right off the peg: "You feel, I suppose, that, in losing Isabella, you lose half yourself: you feel a void in your heart which nothing else can occupy... You feel all this?" It is stirring to hear Catherine's response.

"No," said Catherine, after a few moments' reflection, "I do not—ought I? To say the truth, though I am hurt and grieved,... I do not feel so very, very much afflicted as one would have thought." (207)

There is much to rejoice in here. Not only does she firmly put aside the outfit offered her—showing that she has shaken off Isabella's false sentiment—but she takes "a few moments' reflection"—a rare activity for Catherine; and she carefully discriminates between what she does feel and what she doesn't. She deserves Tilney's heartfelt con-

gratulation: “You feel, as you always do, what is most to the credit of human nature.” He also looks ahead to her further progress: “Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves” (207). Again he puts her on the track of finding things out for herself, *about* herself, and so learning to articulate her self to the world, to dress and present her self appropriately.

The related tropes of dress and language in *Northanger Abbey* have much to do with gender. In civilized society, dress is the most visible marker of gender, while effectiveness in language ought to be “pretty fairly divided between the sexes” (28). In *Northanger Abbey* the women tend to be arrested at the level of surface, self-decoration, and display, and the men to take off with that other signifier, language, which they are just as apt to use and abuse. To bring the two concerns closer, and so lessen the yawning gap between the sexes, is one part of Austen’s endeavor. As Isabella and John Thorpe, false friend and suitor, abuse both dress and language, so they also thrive on and exaggerate sexual difference. Catherine, whose attention gradually turns from dress to expressive speech, and Henry Tilney, who extends her speech capability and likewise knows his muslins (28), gradually lessen sexual difference as they move toward each other.

Jane Austen, as a woman who paid a good deal of attention to bonnets and tippetts herself, and as an author whose mode is language, is understandably fascinated by both dress and expression. In her fable she allows the hero to be the instrument in developing the heroine’s power of articulating her self and extending her consciousness by language: this is merely to offer the probable, for, as Anne Elliot tells Harville in *Persuasion*, “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. . . . The pen has been in their hands” (234). But here in the larger story of the writing of *Northanger Abbey*, the newly launched woman novelist Jane Austen firmly takes the pen into her own hands to show how a teachable heroine gathers control of speech from an articulate hero—and all in “the best chosen language” (38).

NOTE

1. For the elaborate conventions and moral implications of masquerade, see Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth Century Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, CA: SUP, 1986).

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