



“The Probability of Some Negligence”: Avoiding the Horror of the Absent Clergyman

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WHAT IS AT THE HEART of Henry Tilney’s rebuke when he discovers Catherine Morland in the hallway near his mother’s bedroom? She confesses her thoughts that Henry’s mother died as a consequence of some actions on General Tilney’s part, motivated by a lack of affection for his wife. “And from these circumstances,” Henry sternly replies, “you infer perhaps the probability of some negligence . . . or . . . of something still less pardonable” (202). “Remember that we are English, that we are Christians,” he tells her, checking Catherine’s skewed imagination (203). The people in every English neighborhood observe each other’s actions; no English newspaper would allow a mysterious death to be buried in family secrecy. Catherine’s shame is immediate, but it may be difficult for readers to reconcile this sudden solemnity with Henry’s recent Bath banter and flirtation with Miss Morland. As Henry insists that neither he nor the witnessing world have been “negligent” in accounting for his mother’s death, his defensiveness opens a wider context of concern about “negligence.” Henry Tilney, and all of his clerical brethren, must defend themselves against Parliamentary accusations that they have been “negligent” in their pastoral responsibilities.

Henry’s rebuke of Catherine’s suspicions successfully replaces her naïve, gothic sensibility with moral realism, just as Austen’s parody of the gothic novel asserts its displacement by realist fiction. General Tilney did not neglect his ailing wife, and Austen’s novels reveal a world full of both humor and

pain, where unsolvable or supernatural mysteries are rare. But Henry's frighteningly serious turn also reminds Austen's readers that the young clergyman has a deep sense of moral responsibility. When it comes to his duties as a churchman, Henry Tilney is determined that there will be no "probability of negligence" on his part. That aspiration is more challenging than it might seem.

In the spirit of Catherine Morland, I am taking the liberty in this essay of being willfully playful with the literal meaning of Austen's language. When Catherine, Henry, and Eleanor take their walk above Bath, for example, Catherine avers, "I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London" (113). She does not mean that she has heard a report of actual murder and mayhem, but Eleanor, less familiar with the fiction enjoyed by her brother and friend, reacts with alarm, and Henry enjoys his sister's error. When he more seriously corrects Catherine's suspicion about the circumstances of Mrs. Tilney's death, his two undeniable assertions, "We are English" and "We are Christians," are intended to prove that his father is not a murderer, and that any infringement of the law would have been addressed by the kind of attentive citizenry notoriously absent from remote Italian castles in gothic novels. But I wish to use these phrases, and his invocation of "negligence," as a lever to discuss the real-life challenges faced by an English Christian—in particular, an English clergyman—in the late eighteenth century. For this was precisely the era when many English clergymen were being accused of severe neglect of their parish responsibilities. Henry's word "negligence" resonates with church documents from the late eighteenth century that accused clergymen of negligence toward the people of their parish when they chose non-residency or held plural livings.

In 1784, Lewis, Lord Bishop of Norwich, wrote a charge to the clergy of his diocese outlining the spiritual horrors of England in his time and laying part of the blame for current moral depravity at the feet of the religious leaders who failed to do their best for their flock. "Without indulging a gloomy or censorious humour," he writes,

one may safely assert that the most of us here present have lived long enough to see and observe a very amazing alteration in the manners of this Kingdom. . . . Respect and deference to authorities are sunk to almost nothing.—Religious observances are not only slackly attended, but spoken of with contempt and derision. The Sabbath is but little distinguished from the rest of the week; in no circumstance so much as in the greater prevalence of licentious

idleness and vice.—Domestic ties, even the most sacred, are continually violated; and the peace of families sacrificed to brutal passion. Men are grown effeminate by habits of selfish indulgence; and the modest reserve, which not many years ago was regarded as the chief and most engaging ornament of the other sex, has given way to forward assurance and unremitted dissipation. (6-7)

What has brought about this downfall in the nation's character? Since morality is guided by religion, Bishop Lewis asserts, the clergy must hold themselves accountable. Clergymen fall short not by being "grossly immoral" (9) but by failing to be present to guide their parishioners. "The first object for a Parochial Minister," he writes, "is to reside with his flock as constantly as may be" (10). Lewis expects holders of ecclesiastical livings to be resident clergymen, not men who live in a neighboring town and travel into the parish to perform "the stated and occasional duty" (11). He acknowledges that there are many excuses made by those who live either in town or at the parish of their other living, including the low incomes that come with some livings, but he condemns non-residency. "[I]nstead of sheltering our particular negligence under the cloak of a general excuse," Bishop Lewis demands, "endeavour that as much may be done as the nature of our case will admit" (13). Some clergymen complain about "the utter dilapidation of Parsonage Houses" (18). Lewis notes that this excuse for non-residence is actually caused by non-residence: no one is around to care for the house and property. But, he notes, Parliament has identified funds to fix up parsonages through a distribution of "Queen Anne's bounty" (18), a foundation established in 1704 specifically intended to subsidize livings that produced very low incomes (Virgin 2).

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen seems to condemn clerical non-residence through her depiction of Henry Tilney's commitment to his parish at Woodston. Irene Collins notes that none of Austen's fictional clergymen was a pluralist, "except, possibly, Edmund Bertram, who may have kept Thornton Lacey when he moved to Mansfield" (*Clergy* 33). Although he is off-stage in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland's father holds two livings; he gives one to his son James when he announces his engagement to Isabella Thorpe. The smaller income attached to the living James receives suggests that this second living was for an adjacent parish, possibly a village not large enough to provide a parsonage for the clergyman but generating a useful though not absolutely necessary income for the large Morland family. Even the bishops who condemned the practice of pluralism, however, acknowledged that the low incomes of most livings necessitated combining them, and such combination



View of the Parsonage, Alderton, Gloucestershire, by John Buck. R. Ackermann, *The Repository of Arts* (1802). © Trustees of the British Museum.

was deemed allowable if parishes were adjacent and all residents could be served by one clergyman. In 1810, 66% of livings held in Hampshire were plural livings, almost always too small to support a clergyman without supplement (Jacob 97, 100). Alternatives to holding plural livings to supplement income included farming and teaching school. Some Welsh clergymen were even known to keep alehouses (Snape 134). But non-residence, especially in the countryside, was a nationwide concern.

A clergyman who held multiple livings might trade off regularly with a curate, or travel between parishes according to the season (Jacob 104). Thomas Gisborne calls this absence the potential evil of ecclesiastical establishments. Unless they guard themselves by their commitment to religion and concern for their character, “individual Clergymen may be considerably remiss in the discharge of several of their functions, and considerably reprehensible in their mode of life, without incurring any diminution of their incomes” (Gisborne 318-19). Jane Austen’s father, the Reverend George Austen, held livings in the adjoining parishes of Steventon and Deane for twenty years and tended to both, until he hired his son James to be his curate at Deane in 1792 (Collins, *Clergy* 4). James Austen ultimately combined income from three

livings. Irene Collins doubts that he was motivated by poverty, since the combined livings brought him £1100 per year (28). With such an income, James would have been well able to pay a curate, even after bishops moved in the late eighteenth century to ensure that curates had living wages. In 1818, as a curate at Chawton, Henry Austen earned less than £55 a year (Collins 29). He was in good—though struggling—company. According to Peter Virgin in *The Church in an Age of Negligence*, 20% of men ordained in late-Georgian England remained curates their entire lives (140).

Catherine Morland first learns of Henry Tilney's commitment to his parish when he drives her from Bath to Northanger, expressing his gratitude for her company for his sister, Eleanor. He cannot join her as often as he likes since, he explains, "I have an establishment at my own house in Woodston, which is nearly twenty miles from my father's, and some of my time is necessarily spent there" (160). Catherine cannot imagine anyone preferring to spend time in an "ordinary parsonage-house" rather than the abbey (161), but Henry merely smiles and makes up a gothic-tinged history of Northanger.

Henry leaves for Woodston the morning after they arrive at the abbey, following Catherine's night exploring unlocked chests and hoping for mysterious manuscripts in abandoned laundry lists. Parish business will keep Henry away for two to three days. General Tilney's observation that "Woodston will make but a sombre appearance to-day" (179) is meant to advance Catherine's regard for Henry—since at this point General Tilney is still encouraging the match—but Catherine simply asks, "Is it a pretty place?" (180). Catherine is ignorant about many things, but she knows what a parsonage house looks like. This is General Tilney's opportunity to continue to sell his son to her: the house is well built, with a good prospect, kitchen-garden, and livestock within an enclosure; General Tilney built the walls himself. Although many eighteenth-century clergymen were compelled to make their own repairs on the houses provided by the parish, General Tilney, the giver of this living on Tilney land, has kept up the property for his son's sake. In this passage General Tilney also advocates that all sons have a profession, even if they are going to inherit wealth. Although Henry is a second son, General Tilney assures Catherine that the Woodston living is very generous—and it will not be Henry's only source of income.

The next trip Henry takes to Woodston encourages the General to plan a trip there for Catherine. Henry outlines his clerical responsibilities: he will be there on Sunday for services; on Monday he has a parish meeting; and he needs at least two more days to carry out duties among parishioners. The

General's desire to come for dinner on Wednesday launches Henry toward Woodston even earlier, to help his housekeeper prepare for their arrival. This visit occurs in the novel after Catherine has suffered Henry Tilney's humiliating rebuke for letting her imagination get the better of her. She recovers to discover that she is more excited about seeing a country parsonage than she had been about seeing an abbey.

It is Henry's welcome of his family and Catherine at Woodston that underscores his commitment to his work in his parish. The new, stone house with its "semi-circular sweep and green gates" (219) suggests a positive solidity. But the picture of Henry waiting at the door with his dogs—"a large Newfoundland puppy and two or three terriers"—lets the reader know that he is committed to this residence. The Newfoundland will grow into a retriever, leaping into the water to bring back whatever fowl Henry happens to shoot. But the terriers will patrol the clergyman's land, protecting domestic egg-layers and grain piles from pesky vermin. Hunters may come and go, as we know from John Willoughby's or Charles Bingley's habits of going in and out of the country, depending on the shooting season. But terriers protect agriculture, a considerably more stationary pursuit.

General Tilney simultaneously apologizes for and brags about the Woodston parsonage, hedging his bets: it might not be "Fullerton" or "Northanger"; it might stand some improvements; it is merely a parsonage; but it is a far *better* parsonage than most parsonages in England. When Catherine unselfconsciously praises a room and its view of a cottage, the General overbearingly compliments her and announces that he is sure the room will be redone to accommodate her taste. The cottage must be maintained, he declares, for the sake of the view. The General embarrasses Catherine with his remarks, not only because she realizes he is approving her as the next mistress of Woodston parsonage, but also because he exhibits the kind of authority that could wipe out the comforts of some poor family residing in a cottage simply to satisfy the whim of a woman looking through a sitting room window.

General Tilney may have been attempting to sell Woodston parsonage to Catherine because he mistakenly believes her to be an heiress who might aspire to be the mistress of a larger home, but the adequacy of country parsonages was one of the key questions in Jane Austen's day in regard to clergymen's residency in their parishes. In some rural areas, clergymen chose to be "non-resident" because the parsonages were unacceptable or the place was considered "unhealthy." Malaria was a threat in marshy areas. As Bishop Lewis noted, complaints about suitable houses were the most common excuses

for non-residency. Often houses were poorly maintained or beyond repair (Jacob 101-03). Sometimes clergymen rented another house in the parish, forgoing the parsonage. In *Jane Austen, The Parson's Daughter*, Irene Collins reports that when George Austen was named rector of Steventon in 1761, the parsonage house was dilapidated and unwelcoming—but he stayed on as a chaplain and scholar at Oxford, and was not in residence at Steventon until after he married Cassandra Leigh in 1764. Even then, the Austens lived outside Steventon, renting the parsonage in neighboring Deane, until their home could be repaired and upgraded. Their temporary home in Deane parsonage was notably small and damp, and they were unable to move into the Steventon parsonage until 1768 (Collins, *PD* 8-9). In advising newly ordained clergymen, Thomas Gisborne calls residence “a general obligation . . . essential to his being able effectually to perform [the various duties of a parochial Minister]” (349). The fact that Woodston is attractive, solid, and clean—not to mention well settled with terriers—underscores the expectation that Henry Tilney is a clergyman *in residence*, and committed to his parish.

Because Henry Tilney's income from his parish is supplemented by family wealth—as his father reassures Catherine—he is not driven into non-residency by economic necessity. Historian Jeremy Gregory notes that despite widespread pluralism, the majority of combined livings allowed only a minimal standard of living. In 1810, he claims, only 18% of English pluralists could be categorized as gaining a fortune through non-residency. But stories of greed and exploitation overwhelm the cases of clergymen who struggled to support their families. Eighteenth-century Bishop Watson of Llandaff, for example, had no home in his diocese and preferred farming to preaching; but he held five livings, all served by curates, and received a clerical income of £2000, in addition to his agricultural earnings (Abbey and Overton). Many other bishops in the church hierarchy, however, complained so much about non-residency that Parliament created an act in 1803 sharply condemning the practice. The Clergy Residence Act of 1803, introduced by William Scott, defined non-residency so strictly that it included those who simply chose to live in a house other than their parish's parsonage (Gregory 172).

Throughout the eighteenth century, as bishops grew increasingly suspicious of clergy who held plural livings, their only legal recourse had been the Plurality Act of 1529, which made it illegal for clergy to hold two livings if either was worth more than £8 per year, and the 41st Canon of 1604, which restricted the distance between multiple livings to thirty miles, restricted pluralism to clergy who held masters degrees, and required pluralists to reside

in each living a portion of each year. The vagueness of these laws had contributed to non-compliance for two centuries (Virgin 1-2, 160). Parliamentary attempts to govern both the actions of the Church of England and the moral decisions of the British public were reactions to late eighteenth-century concern about clerical greed and the decline of Christian teaching. Thus in 1794, for example, a law was passed restricting work by bakers on Sunday; 1795 saw the Bill for the Better Observation of the Lord's Day; and in 1799 there was an attempt to curb Sunday newspapers (Ditchfield 67). The Residency Act of 1803 did not outlaw plurality, but it required clergy who were not resident in their parishes to obtain a license from their bishops. To obtain such a license, they needed to provide evidence for their inability to live in the parish's parsonage. Clergy presented reasons such as ill health, the lack of a parsonage, or the need to combine income from more than one living in order to support their families. The bishops, who had been the main voices of condemnation of non-residency, generally were displeased with the legislation. While increasing their paperwork (requiring them to read and review applications for licenses), the Act was hardly any more enforceable than the prior legislation because of the breadth of acceptable excuses for non-residency (Virgin 196).

Grumbling about pluralism and non-residency had several sources. Curates who were hired to do the work of the non-resident clergyman were pitifully paid in comparison with the holder of the living. Their modern equivalent is the academic adjunct, who might teach the same course as a full-time faculty member but receive one fifth the compensation, with no opportunity or support for performing research. In 1795, James Woodforde reported in his *Diary* that he had hired a curate "at the rate of thirty Pounds Per Annum with all Surplice Fees" (374). In Woodforde's case, the curate stepped in when he was unable to read Sunday prayers or the Sunday service, but Woodforde continued to perform most of the parish business. As he grew older, he depended on his curate to take over for him, even though he was home, when illness kept him out of the church. The *Diary*, a forty-five-year accounting of James Woodforde's daily diet and expenditures, also recounts most Christmases when, in addition to reading the service and offering communion, he provided a meal for the poor of the parish. In 1793, for example, Woodforde notes, "The following poor People dined at my House or had their Dinner sent them & one Shilling each—Widow Case, my Clerk Tom Thurston, Christopher Dunnell, John Peachman, Tom Carr and Nathaniel Heavers" (342-43). But in 1795, although he entertained "Old Tom Atterton, Ned Howes, Robin Downing, old Mrs Case, old Cutty Dunnell, and my Clerk Tom Thurston" with Christmas

dinner in the rectory, Woodforde's curate, Mr. Corbould, administered the sacrament at church. "It hurt me to think that I could not do it myself," he records, "but suffering so much the last Christmas Day by the cold, am afraid since to go to Church during the Winter Season" (375). In this case, the underpaid curate is more of an assistant than a substitute; Woodforde portrays him as grateful for the employment. Since Woodforde's time is not spent entirely with the poor—he visits with the parish squire and others from the upper end of society—his curate, Mr. Corbould, also extended his social compass.

On the whole, the gap between the salary received by the holder of a living and the curate he employed was very wide. A. Tindal Hart, in *The Eighteenth-Century Country Parson*, cites the example of a Wiltshire rector who took home £700 per year and paid his curate £80 (19). Unlike James Woodforde, this clergyman was non-resident, and the curate was expected to assume all the parish responsibilities. But the organization of both academia and the Church of England is more aristocratic than socialist. Extra livings would not be redistributed to needy curates, who were educated and capable of holding a living, because throughout the eighteenth century the system of patronage that controlled the giving out of livings had grown stronger and more impenetrable. Jane Austen joins those who condemn the abuse of ecclesiastical patronage through her depiction of Lady Catherine and the sycophantic Mr. Collins. But she accepted its inevitability and hoped for benevolence, pointing to potentially generous practices in the example of Colonel Brandon's gift to Edward Ferrars.

In 1809 and 1810, the Residence Act was refined, assisting bishops in counting which parishes had resident clergy and which did not. The 1810 amendment further divided "non-residents" who "performed Sunday duty" from those who did not (Virgin 196). But in the countryside, the eighteenth-century clergyman's contribution to his parish went considerably beyond sermons. He presided over disputes, he wrote letters on behalf of those who lacked literacy skills, and he helped villagers think about agricultural practice. In villages without apothecaries or surgeons, he might have been the keeper of the only medicine box available to treat health concerns (Virgin 44). This list of activities—including ownership of a first aid box—does not seem to describe *Emma's* Mr. Elton. We laugh at Harriet when she retains the piece of court plaister the clergyman throws away. Yet he is even more an object of satirical humor, since he doubtless accepted the sticky bandage to treat his minor cut because it was Emma's suggestion. He was, admittedly, away from home, but we are not led to think of Mr. Elton as someone who would come up

with a practical medical solution himself, or have court plaister at the ready. Although Mr. Elton recognizes his responsibility to engage in the affairs of the people of Highbury, one difference between Mr. Elton and Henry Tilney is that Elton seeks out the rich and self-sufficient. He is happy to take up Mr. Knightley's time and pretend to be interested in agricultural reports. When Henry Tilney stays in Woodston for parish meetings, however, his generosity and lack of snobbery lead us to infer that he engages with cottagers and farmers and is often sought out for consultation.

If Woodston is anything like James Woodforde's parish in a small village in Norfolk, Henry Tilney's ecclesiastical responsibilities would include visiting the sick, burying the dead, baptizing children, marrying couples, distributing charity, and drilling confirmation classes. Woodforde spent his days visiting both the poor and the well off, sympathizing with parents whose children left for naval service, hunting and fishing with men in the parish, and comforting parents whose premature children would not live long past their emergency baptisms.

At the end of *Northanger Abbey*, when Catherine and Henry are forced by the Morlands' principles to defer their marriage until they receive General Tilney's consent, the clergyman returns to his parish, "now his only home" (259). His care for "his young plantations" and his other improvements indicate the permanence of his residency. Although Henry is permitted to return to Northanger when his sister's fortunate marriage softens the General enough to listen to the truth about Catherine and to grant his consent to his son's marriage, one senses that Henry has completely moved out of the abbey and that his residency in Woodston is secure.

When we turn back to the first page of *Northanger Abbey*, we see that Austen was aware of the contemporary arguments about clerical negligence and of the difficulties clergymen faced when they were expected to live and work in their own parishes. In the third sentence, we learn that one shortcoming of Catherine Morland's aspiration to be a heroine was that her "father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard—and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence besides two good livings—and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters" (5). As Bishop Lewis noted, the clergy's greatest excuse for negligence was the impoverishment they suffered in poor livings. Mr. Morland had no such excuse, and we must surmise that, in addition to his failure to play the role of the tortured man who turns villainous in Catherine's favorite gothic fiction, neither was Mr. Morland negligent of his flock.

In terms of clerical responsibility, therefore, both Mr. Morland and Mr. Tilney may be judged “not negligent.” They are clergymen in residence, they do not abuse curates, and they attend to parish responsibilities throughout the week. But what about personal responsibility? Henry Tilney’s surprisingly jarring reminder that “we are English” and “we are Christian” is indeed defensive: his mother was not murdered, and he is a caring clergyman. Yet when his father unexpectedly and cruelly ejects Catherine from their home, Henry Tilney stands by, frozen into ineffectiveness by his father’s abusive authority. Catherine is home and miserable before Henry risks permanent estrangement from his father by renouncing the General and confirming his affection for Catherine. Henry proves himself to be truly “English” and “Christian” not when he denounces Catherine’s gothic delusions, but when he fights the moral abuses of everyday life.

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