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Northanger Abbey

Jane Austen was surely teasing when in her 'Advertisement' she called *Northanger Abbey* a 'little work'. On the face of it, this story, like so many stories, like so many of Jane Austen's stories, tells of a young girl's entrance into the world, her achievement of some kind of intellectual maturity, and her marriage to a man entirely suitable for her. The tale seems slight, parodic,[1] of interest only to females, and therefore to be dismissed as trivial. For some, only the facility and accuracy save the day. It is well done, certainly, but was it worth doing at all?

But the tale may be told another way, like this. Catherine Morland, though ignorant, and assailed by corrupt companions and corrupting reading, develops her own powers of understanding at Bath. Free from the biases of traditional education, she courageously tests her hypothesis that General Tilney is a murderer. She picks her way through falsehood and hypocrisy until she proves herself rational, able to know true from false. Her pursuit after happiness, the proper aim of any reasonable being, is fulfilled in the perfect felicity of her marriage. This book shows a mind educating itself through innate powers.

If this sounds familiar, it is, for *Northanger Abbey* is, I believe, a close realisation of ideas from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, while Catherine's education derives from his influential treatise.[2] *Northanger Abbey*'s words and phrases often resemble Locke's as I shall show,[3] and though only a novel, its aim may be as serious as his, to explore how one may take 'a Survey of our own Understandings, examine our own Powers, and see to what Things they were adapted' (I.i.7). To exercise our reason, says Locke, is to praise the God who gave it, and this is what Catherine Morland, as a reasonable Christian, does.

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It would be remarkable if Jane Austen knew nothing of Locke, whose *Essay* was the most influential book of the eighteenth century, except for the Bible. The posthumously published addition *On the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706) and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) were several times reprinted in the eighteenth century. What made Locke's philosophy of mind so very agreeable to a wide variety of people, especially women, must have been its assurance that everyone could develop powers of understanding. Locke's thesis that everyone started equal, his argument that everyone should be educated at home as girls had always been, and his preference for English and virtue over classical languages, all obviously appealed to those denied an education for reasons of class or sex. Locke's emphasis on individual perception rather than on blind submission to received opinion must make him at least partially responsible for the sudden upsurge of feminism in the eighteenth century.

Intelligent women in particular could have seen how to take responsibility for themselves. The pioneering feminist Mary Astell, Mrs Catherine Cockburn, and Locke's patron Lady Damaris Masham all commented on Locke. Richardson, that middle-class autodidact, found Locke sympathetic for the same reasons as the women did. Pamela comments at length on Locke's *Education* (VI. 258–315), and part of an important debate about learning and languages in *Sir Charles Grandison* depends upon it.[4] Even Mrs Fitzpatrick claimed to have read *Human Understanding* in *Tom Jones* (XI. vii), and Dorothea Brooke would marry Casaubon because he reminded her of Locke. Whether Jane Austen met Locke at one remove, or whether she read him for herself we do not know. What does matter is to see how systematically and intelligently she 'translates' him in *Northanger Abbey*.

Catherine Morland's education

Jane Austen presents an image of successful education with a mischievous hint, like Locke's, that she is stepping out of line. Where he addresses those who 'dare venture to consult their own Reason, in the Education of their Children, rather than wholly to rely upon Old Custom' (§ 216), Jane Austen flouts not only romantic but educational conventions to speak in the first

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chapter of Catherine Morland's 'extraordinary' abilities, or nonsensically of the fact that 'she could never learn or understand any thing before she was taught'. (Johnson wrote similarly in his life of Milton that 'nobody can be taught faster than he can learn'.) Catherine's failure to become a fashionable female is described as 'profligacy', and yet strange and unaccountable as it seems, she turns out well. Her busy mother's tolerant neglect together with her own determined choices make up in fact an educational programme exactly like that prescribed by Locke to more deliberate parents. All the benefits result that he had hoped for, her escape from the corruptions of education, and her engaging readiness to learn.[5]

Jane Austen describes Catherine's early years with speed and precision. 'Fond of all boys' plays', preferring 'cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country' to the conventional pursuits of girls (13, 15),[6] Catherine fulfils Locke's opening recommendation for a healthy mind in a healthy body. She always will. When Henry advises more frequent exercise, and objects that her love for a hyacinth is 'rather domestic' – like Locke's complaint that painting is 'a sedentary Recreation' (§ 203) – she replies firmly, 'but I do not want any such pursuit to get me out of doors. The pleasure of walking and breathing fresh air is enough for me, and in fine weather I am out more than half my time. – Mamma says, I am never within' (174). So too Locke had recommended that the more girls are in the air, 'the stronger and healthier they will be; and the nearer they come to the Hardships of their Brothers in their Education, the greater Advantage will they receive from it all the remaining Part of their Lives' (§ 9). Catherine is plain, with a thin and awkward figure, but to Locke 'plain and rough Nature left to it self, is much better than an Artificial Ungracefulness' (§ 66.2). She does grow to be '*almost* pretty' (15) as Locke had promised. 'Never trouble your self about those Faults in them, which you know Age will cure', he says reassuringly (§ 67). Her healthy body is assisted as much by the good constitution of her mother (13) as by the fact that she is usually a sound sleeper: 'nothing is more to be indulged Children than *Sleep* ... nothing contributing more to the Growth and Health of Children than *Sleep*', says Locke (§ 21).

Her mother's benign neglect, for 'her time was so much occupied in lying-in and teaching the little ones, that her elder

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daughters were inevitably left to shift for themselves' (15), conforms to Locke's advice that children 'for all their innocent Folly, Playing and *Childish Actions, are to be left perfectly free and unrestrained*' (§ 63). Catherine, writes Jane Austen, was noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house (14). Nor does Mrs Morland force an education upon her daughter unsuitable to youth. If Catherine is 'often inattentive, and occasionally stupid' (14), Locke knew that 'Inadvertency, forgetfulness, unsteadiness, and wandring of Thought, are the natural Faults of Childhood' (§ 167). Locke recommends Aesop's Fables (§ 156); Mrs Morland chooses for Catherine an appropriate one from Gay, about a naive hare betrayed by friends. But the fact that her daughter takes three months to learn it confirms the truth of Locke's observation that learning by heart is time and pains mis-spent (§ 175). His repeated recommendation that learning should never 'be made a Burthen to [children], or imposed on them as a *Task*' if they are not to take an aversion to it (§ 73.1) is implicitly accepted by Mrs Morland, who once Catherine's enthusiasm for music evaporates, 'did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste, [and] allowed her to leave off' (14). Locke maintains that music 'wastes so much of a young Man's time, to gain but a moderate Skill in it ... Our short Lives will not serve us for the attainment of all things' (§ 197). Elsewhere in her novels Jane Austen portrays this female accomplishment as a trap. Marianne Dashwood's sensibility is dangerously heightened by her musical powers, Mary Bennet's musical earnestness turns her into a public guy, Janet Fairfax's proficiency drives her to the slave-trade of governessing, and Anne Elliot plays that other people may dance. Elizabeth Bennet, however, plays only to amuse herself, and Emma Woodhouse, queen of Highbury, will never practise.

Locke is equally kindly about that other female accomplishment, drawing. 'Ill Painting is one of the worst things in the World; and to attain a tolerable degree of Skill in it, requires too much ... Time' (§ 203). Catherine's taste for drawing is 'not superior', and as her look-alike houses and trees, hens and chickens show, she has 'no notion of drawing' (14, 16). Mrs Morland does not press her. Where the genius for drawing is wanting, says Locke, 'it is better to let him pass [it] by quietly,

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than to vex him about [it] to no purpose: And therefore in this, as in all other things not absolutely necessary, the Rule holds, *Nihil invitâ Minervâ'* (§ 161).

If Locke recommends the memorising of 'Wise and Useful Sentences' for their 'future Life' (§ 176), Catherine in a delightful inversion learns 'those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of [heroines'] eventful lives' (15). But otherwise the result is everything that Locke predicts. Catherine has neither a bad heart nor a bad temper, and is very kind to the little ones; 'Vertue, and a well-temper'd Soul is to be preferr'd to any sort of *Learning* or *Language'*, says Locke, so 'teach him betimes to love, and be *good natur'd* to others' (§§ 177, 139). She is seldom stubborn, and stubbornness is rare under Locke's regime; she is rarely tyrannical, a vice that Locke warns parents against (§§ 78, 109). Most important of all, she never lies, a habit of which he says 'a Child should be brought up in the greatest abhorrence ... imaginable' (§ 131).

Such is Catherine when she leaves her father's house, promisingly ignorant and eager to learn. As Henry says she is 'a very close questioner' (151), often curious. Curiosity in children, says Locke, 'is but an Appetite after Knowledge ... the great Instrument Nature has provided, to remove that Ignorance they were born with; and which, without this busie *Inquisitiveness*, will make them dull and useless Creatures'. The tutor's task, then, is to answer all questions however ignorant. Children may 'modestly put in their Question as Learners' (§§ 118, 145), and Catherine does so during Henry's lecture on the picturesque taste. She is 'so hopeful a scholar' that Henry is delighted with her progress. Jane Austen's comments on the attractions of imbecility, or ignorance, in females (111) recalls Richardson's pedant Walden, who enjoys instructing an ignorant and humble woman (*Grandison*, I. 70).

But Henry is not always an ideal tutor for Catherine. He condescendingly accuses his sister of being stupid, that is, not rational, about the very shocking thing to come out of London, and raillies her and Catherine in a whole string of epistomological words:

> Come, shall I make you understand each other or leave you to puzzle out an explanation as you can? No – I will be noble. I will prove myself

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> a man, no less by the generosity of my soul than the clearness of my head. I have no patience with such of my sex as disdain to let themselves sometimes down to the comprehension of yours. Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute – neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit. (112)

Catherine grows grave, and Eleanor rebukes him. 'And now, Henry ... that you have made us understand each other, you may as well make Miss Morland understand yourself – unless you mean to have her think you intolerably rude to your sister, and a great brute in your opinion of women in general' (113). To Locke a 'brute', a beast, is not-human, not employing one's God-given and uniquely human powers (IV.xvii.1),[7] so that Henry by calling his sister 'stupid' and 'simpleton' proves himself to be so. Because he is not in a sober mood, Eleanor excuses his frivolous riposte, lifted straight from Sir Charles Grandison (III.246–7), that he does indeed 'think very highly of the understanding of all the women in the world – especially of those – whoever they may be – with whom I happen to be in company' (113–14). Catherine, who loves Henry, believes he can never be wrong, but Locke, writing sternly of education as 'so nice and tickle a business, wherein a little slip may spoil all', advises that any wrong turn may leave upon the mind of those made uneasy by it 'the lasting memory of having been piquantly, though wittily taunted for some thing censurable in them' (§ 143.3).

Far more efficacious an educator than Henry, and here I must disagree with those who admire him as mentor and spokesman,[8] is his sister Eleanor. The tutor, says Locke, should remember that 'his business is not so much to teach him all that is knowable, as to raise in him a love and esteem for Knowledge; and to put him in the right way of knowing and improving himself, when he has a mind to it' (§ 195). Henry does well to lead Catherine easily from the picturesque, a piece of rocky fragment, the withered oak and oaks in general, to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government (111), and he responds warmly to Catherine's announcement that she has learnt to love a hyacinth. By accident or argument, he asks. 'Your sister taught me', replies Catherine, 'I cannot tell how'. Where Mrs Allen's 'pains, year after year' have not succeeded, Eleanor's loving instruction has. Henry sees that an important start has

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been made: 'Who can tell, the sentiment once raised, but you may in time come to love a rose?'. He adds, more seriously, 'The mere habit of learning to love is the thing; and a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing. – Has my sister a pleasant mode of instruction?' (174). The arguments that learning should be pleasant, that habits of learning and eagerness to learn should be encouraged, are central to the radical educational theory of Locke.

Rational conversation with a loving tutor is vital; so too is the judicious use of books. But Catherine falls prey to Mrs Radcliffe's sensationalism, her addiction more complicated than once thought. Jane Austen criticises not just *Udolpho*, but what it has meant to Catherine. Bad company has influenced her into reading it; her curiosity is factitiously activated by queries about the black veil; she is encouraged to prefer imagination to the real and the probable and therefore cannot act empirically; she is frightened; and she is corrupted by her only available substitute for the Grand Tour.

'There is no part wherein the understanding needs a more careful and wary conduct than in the use of books', writes Locke, lest 'in [children's] tender years, ideas that have no natural cohesion come not to be united in their heads' (*Education*, p. 57). By false analogy Catherine connects Mrs Radcliffe's Italian scenes to General Tilney and Northanger Abbey, whereas, as Locke says, we must not 'suffer our Understandings to be misguided by a wrong supposition of Analogy where there is none' (*Conduct*, § 38). When Catherine meditates by turns 'on broken promises and broken arches, phaetons and false hangings, Tilneys and trapdoors' (87), when she thinks that General Tilney has 'the air and attitude of a Montoni' (187), she practises an 'instantaneous Legerdemain' by which 'one Idea is substituted for the other' (*Conduct*, § 39).

When she joins Italian fictions to English realities, Catherine makes faulty complex ideas out of simple ones. In Locke's opinion 'there is not any one thing that deserves more to be looked after' in young people because the mind no longer knows what agrees to 'the reality of Things, and what not' (II. xxxiii. 9, xxx. 3). Fancy divorced from nature gives rise to Catherine's elaborate surmises about Mrs Tilney in a passage brimming with conditional words and phrases, 'likely', 'probability', 'conclusion

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which necessarily followed', 'idea', 'supposition', 'not unlikely', 'remembered', 'plausibility of this conjecture', 'memory', 'might well have', 'perhaps', 'surmises', 'supported by such appearances as made their dismissal impossible' (187–8).

Typically then, Catherine's busy young mind quickly, too quickly, puts together ideas that do not belong. She herself will come to castigate her theorizing in Lockean terms when she regrets 'the extravagance of her late fancies', her 'folly', the 'liberty which her imagination had dared to take with the character of his father … the absurdity of her curiosity and her fears' (199), rather as Locke had spoken of taking a 'Liberty' in forming complex ideas (II. xxx. 3). He concludes that we 'run our selves into the most extravagant Errors and Miscarriages' when we 'set up phancy for our supreme and sole Guide, and … believe any Proposition to be true, any Action to be right, only because we believe it to be so' (IV. xix. 11). So Catherine learns, when she ceases to combine Mrs Radcliffe's Italy with Regency England.

Locke attacks those who fail to 'preserve [the child's] tender Mind' from 'fearful Apprehensions' (§ 138), but Mrs Radcliffe inspires terror deliberately. Henry is equally culpable when he encourages her fears, as even Catherine realises when she says, 'it was in a great measure his own doing' (173). Her perception is remarkable because of her love-struck deference to Henry. She says stoutly, 'I do not think I should be easily frightened', and argues logically that the Abbey has not been left long deserted, nor does the family return to it unawares, 'without giving any notice, as generally happens'. She recognizes that 'this is just like a book', and is 'sure your housekeeper is not really Dorothy'. Miss Tilney, she is sure, would never put her into such a chamber as he had described: 'She was not at all afraid' (158–60). She resists the Radcliffean ideas pressed upon her by an irresponsible and teasing tutor.[9] Jane Austen's parody of the Gothic novel is obvious, but her implications are Lockean. Nor was this the first time that Catherine exercised her independent understanding, as we shall see.

Finally, *Udolpho* is Catherine's Grand Tour, as she explains at Beechen Cliff:

> 'I never look at it,' said Catherine, as they walked along the side of the river, 'without thinking of the South of France.'

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> 'You have been abroad then?' said Henry, a little surprized.
>
> 'Oh! no, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through, in the "Mysteries of Udolpho".' (106)

Locke believed that although the Tour crowned a pupil's wisdom (§ 212), it proved the superiority of English morality and manners. Sir Charles Grandison may dally with a lovely Italian, but the return to English religion, ways, and wife is irresistible. By the time that Jane Austen or even Pope wrote, the Tour seemed not education's crown, but its perversion. Europe corrupted, tutors misled. When Catherine's tutor Henry encourages her hypothesis that people are fiends, she travels in the only way she can through Italy, Switzerland, the South of France, the Alps, and the Pyrenees, shakes off their corruptions when she proves her hypothesis wrong, and returns safely to the central part of England. Unlike most young men, she survives the corruptions of the Grand Tour. When she rejects Mrs Radcliffe and the deceiving tutorship of Henry, when she recognises that 'among the English ... in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad', when she admits that there might even be some slight imperfection in Henry and Eleanor and some actual specks in the character of their father, a man whom she believes, 'upon serious consideration, to be not perfectly amiable' (200), she has reached Locke's educational goal, which was to acquaint the pupil 'with the true State of the World, and dispose him to think no Man better or worse, wiser or foolisher, than really he is' (§ 94).[10] Catherine escapes the snares of education by shaping her mind herself.

'The dark room of the understanding'

The climactic test of Catherine's understanding is her bold attempt to prove that General Tilney has murdered his wife in the 'cell', the 'prison' of her gloomy bedroom (188–9). Flinging open the door, she sees however 'a large, well-proportioned apartment ... a bright Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes and neatly painted chairs, on which the warm beams of a western sun gaily poured through two sash windows!' (193). It is as though Jane Austen makes an event out of Locke's traditional metaphor for enlightenment. Sensations, he argues,

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> are the Windows by which light is let into this *dark Room*. For, methinks, the *Understanding* is not much unlike a Closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible Resemblances, or *Ideas* of things without ... (II. xi. 17)

'Like the bright Sun-shine', this kind of knowledge leaves 'no room for Hesitation, Doubt, or Examination, but the Mind is presently filled with the clear Light of it' (IV. ii. 1). The dark room of Catherine's mind lights up in the same way when 'astonishment and doubt' give way to a 'ray of common sense' (193),[11] when what Locke called 'this clear Light, some Sparks of bright Knowledge' (IV. xvii. 15), fill her mind with certainty and truth.

This important scene of the mind's illumination is prefigured by others. When, for instance, Catherine's 'fancy' at the Abbey leads her to hope for Gothic windows with 'the smallest divisions, and the heaviest stone-work, for painted glass, dirt and cobwebs', she must admit that 'every pane was so large, so clear, so light!' (162). The mysterious dark chest opens to reveal a white cotton counterpane, and the 'bright morning' after darkness allows her to see that she holds a mere inventory of linen (164, 170–2). Thus this last recognition scene builds upon several in which Catherine's mind proceeds from dark to light, from error to truth, prompted by the evidence of her own eyes.

The scene that follows consolidates what she has learnt. Henry advises her, somewhat unnecessarily, to consult her own understanding, 'your own observation of what is passing around you' (197). Locke too urges the reader to 'stand still, open the eyes, look about, and take a view of the consequence', to look at 'Things as really they are' (II. xxi. 67, xi. 15). Catherine has created mixed modes, 'assemblages of *Ideas* put together at the pleasure of the Mind, pursuing its own ends of Discourse, and suited to its own Notions' (III. ix. 7). As Henry asks, 'What have you been judging from?' (197). Judgment discriminates true from false, says Locke, by perceiving '*the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*' (IV. i. 2). This bright and comfortable room resists the idea of Mrs Tilney murdered.

Henry also tells her to consult her 'own sense of the probable'. Probability is the conformity of any thing with our own observation, says Locke, and though not the 'broad day-light' of