

JANE AUSTEN
AND THE FICTION
OF HER TIME

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CHAPTER I

The juvenilia, the early unfinished novels and 'Northanger Abbey'

Early in her reading experience Jane Austen became obsessively interested in the form and language of the novel, and in its relationship with its readers; her first experimental writing was dominated by attempts to refashion fiction as she knew it. With merciless disrespect she isolated elements which were at best formulaic, at worst perfunctory. Early burlesque shows Austen identifying popular narrative forms as hypnotic and thought-denying. She was moved to make hilarious fun of the wilder examples of the novel of sensibility, and some even wilder interpretations of the liberation ideologies of the French *philosophes*; but ordinary received moral wisdom was not exempt from her youthful scorn. Her earliest writing puts a number of fashionable fictional stereotypes, often derived from the pomposities of conduct-literature as well as from fashionable progressive ideas, into a domestic frame which renders them ludicrous and, more importantly, shows them to be repetitious and stultifying. From the start she set out to put forms and theories to the test of the everyday, without which they were, as she saw it, merely substitutes for coherent and rational deliberation.

The language of contemporary moral discourse fascinated her. She perceived very early that formulaic phrase-building can acquire the ring of truth, and she often parodies the typical Johnsonian antithetical maxim – for example, in the description of Lady Williams in *Jack and Alice* we are informed that: ‘Tho’ Benevolent & Candid, she was Generous & sincere; Tho’ Pious & Good, she was Religious & amiable, and Tho’ Elegant and Agreeable, she was Polished & Entertaining.’ Common sentence patterns are constantly used either to create nonsense or to turn conventional moral expectation on its head; also in *Jack and Alice* we read: ‘The Johnsons were a family of Love, & though a little addicted to the Bottle & the Dice, had many good Qualities’ (*MW* 13). The joke is clear enough,

but its implication is less so – mouthing phrases can be a substitute for thought, language can be used as a soporific.

The parodic experimental novels in *Volume the Second, Love and Freindship* and *Lesley Castle* are also concerned with the effects of a conventional, formulaic language. Expected elements of the Mackenzie style of epistolary narrative unroll on the page, producing a comic double-take – for example, this from *Lesley Castle*:

Perhaps you may flatter me so far as to be surprised that one of whom I speak with so little affection should be my particular freind; but to tell you the truth, our freindship arose rather from Caprice on her side than Esteem on mine. We spent two or three days together with a Lady in Berkshire with whom we both happened to be connected – . During our visit, the Weather being remarkably bad, and our party particularly stupid, she was so good as to conceive a violent partiality for me, which very soon settled in a downright Freindship and ended in an established correspondence. She is probably by this time as tired of me, as I am of her; but as she is too polite and I am too civil to say so, our letters are still as frequent and affectionate as ever, and our Attachment as firm and sincere as when it first commenced. (*MW* 120)

The sober balance of the initial phrasing and sententious vocabulary for a moment conceal the outright nonsense of the sentiments. Both *Love and Freindship* and *Lesley Castle* are full of similar deliciously ludicrous moments. But there is more to this than mere burlesque of a style. As her experiments continue Austen engages also with the increasingly stereotyped fictional concepts of human relationships and motives which she observed in sentimental novels and edges into a challenge to fashionable moral and social trends. Popular reversals of current convention, such as contempt for the practicalities of life, for parental guidance and the ordinary demands of family and society, are thrown into ridicule more for their lack of pragmatic applicability than for their moral implications. She invents characters who are virtually dead to all common sense. In *Love and Freindship* Edward's ritual defiance of his father takes precedence over his real desires – he is hamstrung by 'common cant':

'My Father, seduced by the false glare of Fortune and the Deluding Pomp of Title, insisted on my giving my hand to Lady Dorothea. No never exclaimed I. Lady Dorothea is lovely and Engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but know Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your Wishes. No! Never shall it be said that I obliged my Father.' (*MW* 81)

Having married Laura after less than half-an-hour's acquaintance he

pours scorn on his sensible sister's concern for the couple's means of livelihood: "Victuals and Drink! . . . and dost thou then imagine that there is no other support for an exalted Mind (such as is my Laura's) than the mean and indelicate employment of Eating and Drinking?" (MW 83).

Such broadly comic treatment of fashionable sentiment gives way to something more serious in the more extended but ultimately abortive novels, *Catharine or The Bower* (1792), *Lady Susan* (1793–4) and *The Watsons* (1804–5) (MW 193–363). The reasons why these attempts were abandoned may hold some clues to the gradual development of Austen's fictional aims. I include *Catharine* among the unfinished novels rather than as part of the juvenilia as defined by R. W. Chapman (MW vii) on the grounds that it is a far more complex fiction than the other fragmentary narratives and marks a turning-point. All three abortive novels move away from burlesque; though they are still on the attack, often through derision, they have a largely different target. Austen does not take contemporary attempts to overturn traditional moral conventions too seriously – for her, trendy radical ideas were easy objects of ridicule. The acid test of the day-to-day was enough. Not for her the solemnities of Maria Edgeworth in 'Letters of Julia and Caroline' or Jane West in *A Tale of the Times*, for instance, where misery or death lie in wait for those too easily persuaded to adopt fashionably extreme notions.¹ But this did not mean that she accepted the currently respectable moral and social precepts without reservation, and in *Catharine* some of these are also held up not so much to ridicule as to ironic examination. In 1790, at the beginning of the period when most of the juvenilia and fragmentary novels were being written, *The Young Lady's Pocket Library, or Parental Monitor*, a compilation of conduct books dating from 1727 to 1774 was published.² This work, like many others produced at the time, proved a profitable investment for the publisher – such was the nervousness, particularly about the education of young women, which had been engendered by current events in France, and by a long superficial acquaintance with egalitarian 'philosophies', associated mainly with Rousseau and Voltaire, who were supposed to be attacking all traditional standards, especially of sexual morality. A salutary dose of old-fashioned notions of feminine compliance to duty and submission was thought appropriate reading for girls – not least as an antidote to novel-reading. One of the works contained in the compilation was Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy*

to his *Daughters*. Jane Austen had certainly read this, for she refers to it in *Northanger Abbey*.³ The character 'Catharine', or 'Kitty' as she is called through much of her short fictional life in Austen's unfinished story, is a direct negative response to the sort of pontification about the proper behaviour of young girls which is to be found in this treatise, and which the young Austen clearly saw as mindless and irrelevant. Typical of Gregory's pronouncements is the following:

One of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration . . . This modesty, which I think so essential in your sex, will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company . . . There is a native dignity in ingenuous modesty to be expected in your sex, which is your natural protection from the familiarities of men, and which you should feel previous to the reflection that it is your interest to keep yourselves sacred from all personal freedoms.⁴

Mary Wollstonecraft was shortly to point out how much this sort of thing pandered to the desires of men rather than the well-being of women,⁵ but Austen is more interested in what she saw as its irrelevance to social realities. Modest reserve is not a feature of Catharine's persona; although she is aware that she perhaps ought to be less forthcoming, her native warmth and friendliness usually supervene. Catharine's guardian, Mrs Percival, is well acquainted with conduct literature, but bringing up a girl has been made to appear so complicated that she has been forced to reduce the whole gamut to a single precept – let not your daughter *meet a man* and you will be safe. Mrs Percival is not at all clear whether she is worried about Catharine's morals or her money, whether she may be prey to a seducer or a fortune-hunter. She clings to a single, unvarying, second-hand prohibition because she has become incapable of thinking. The consequence is that Catharine, a cheerful, intelligent girl, has no real respect for her aunt, and is thrown back on her own resources when, alone in the house, she has to receive an unknown young man whose charming indifference to decorum she is unable to combat without seeming prudish and over-refined; ordinary good humour and congeniality predominate over propriety as she is persuaded to go alone with him to join her family at a ball and enters the room in company with him – both cardinal sins in her aunt's eyes:

There was such an air of good humour and Gaiety in Stanley, that Kitty, tho' perhaps not authorized to address him with so much familiarity on so

short an acquaintance, could not forbear indulging the natural Unreserve & Vivacity of her own Disposition, in speaking to him, as he spoke to her. She was intimately acquainted too with his Family who were her relations, and she chose to consider herself entitled by the connexion to forget how little a while they had known each other. (*MW* 216)

Catharine tries, somewhat ineffectively, to persuade Stanley to adopt a conventional attitude on their arrival, and when he accuses her of prudery points out that she has already offended against decorum by coming alone in the carriage with him. He says:

‘Do not you think your Aunt will be as much offended with you for one, as for the other of these mighty crimes.’

‘Why really said Catherine, I do not know but that she may; however, it is no reason that I should offend against Decorum a second time, because I have already done it once.’

‘On the contrary, that is the very reason which makes it impossible for you to prevent it, since you cannot offend for the *first time* again.’ (*MW* 219)

Catharine chooses not to appear ‘missish’ on the Gregory model and answers in the same kind – ‘“You are very ridiculous, said she laughing, but I am afraid your arguments divert me too much to convince me”’ (*MW* 219) – and subsequently appears before her outraged aunt ‘with a smile on her Countenance, and a glow of mingled Cheerfulness & Confusion on her Cheeks, attended by a young Man uncommonly handsome, and who without any of her Confusion, appeared to have all her vivacity’ (*MW* 220).

When she is subsequently found in her ‘bower’ with him, Mrs Percival is overwhelmed with despair at the depravity of her ward, although the reader is aware that Catharine had initiated none of these transgressions, but is unable to escape them except by downright bad manners. She is rushed into submitting to ‘freedoms’ (Edward Stanley kisses her hand with the deliberate intention of shocking Mrs Percival), which she could only have avoided by being permanently and obsessively mindful of strictures such as Dr Gregory’s, and investing the situation with more significance than it really has. This clash of two or three imperatives confusing the actions and thoughts of protagonists was to become typical of the development of an Austen novel, and is helped on by the ‘*style indirecte libre*’ which Austen did not perhaps invent, but which reaches a very high degree of sophistication in her hands even in this piece of a novel. By this method Catharine is perceived by the reader to be

toying with ideas inadmissible by such as Dr Gregory; she would like Edward to be in love with her:

The more she had seen of him, the more inclined was she to like him, & the more desirous that he should like *her*. She was convinced of his being naturally very clever and very well disposed, and that his thoughtlessness & negligence, which tho' they appeared to *her* as very becoming in *him*, she was aware would by many people be considered as defects in his Character, merely proceeded from a vivacity always pleasing in Young Men, & were far from testifying a weak or vacant Understanding. Having settled this point within herself, and being perfectly convinced by her own arguments of it's truth, she went to bed in high Spirits, determined to study his Character, and watch his Behaviour still more the next day. (*MW* 235)

Catharine, we perceive, is in a muddle, and could be fooled. But, also like her, we are not altogether sure; the only thing that is certain is that Mrs Percival's vacuous bleating of conduct-book platitudes has been and will be useless in helping her niece to deal with real-life situations:

'This is beyond any thing you ever did *before*; beyond any thing I ever heard of in my Life! Such Impudence, I never witnessed before in such a Girl! And this is the reward for all the cares I have taken in your Education; for all my troubles & Anxieties! and Heaven knows how many they have been! All I wished for, was to breed you up virtuously; I never wanted you to play upon the Harpsichord, or draw better than any one else; but I had hoped to see you respectable and good; to see you able & willing to give an example of Modesty and Virtue to the Young people hereabouts. I bought you Blair's Sermons, and *Cœlebs in Search of a Wife*, gave you the key to my own Library, and borrowed a great many good books of my Neighbours for you, all to this purpose. But I might have spared myself the trouble – Oh! Catherine, you are an abandoned Creature, and I do not know what will become of you.' (*MW* 232)

All this is grossly out of keeping with the offence in question and, it should be noted, is second-hand wisdom. Mrs Percival has never done anything to assist Catharine through the moral maze of life but give her books to read. It is clear that Austen had strong views on the inefficacy of popular conduct-works, for in 1809, seventeen years after first writing this story, she substituted Hannah More's *Cœlebs in Search of a Wife*,⁶ the current book of guidance for pattern females, for the older explanation of the catechism by Thomas Secker.⁷ In bringing Mrs Percival up to date Austen demonstrates her continuing consciousness of the absurdity of model heroines such as More's Lucilla Stanley. In Catharine we have the first early glimpse

of the typical Austen heroine wandering virtually pilotless among a number of moral and social paradigms designed to guide her but, from their unpractical nature, incapable of doing any such thing. Catharine's intelligence is insulted by Mrs Percival's mindless parrotting of the current belief that in the modesty of females lies the safety of the nation (received wisdom from 1791 and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*):

'But I plainly see that every thing is going to sixes & sevens and all order will soon be at an end throughout the Kingdom.'

'Not however Ma'am the sooner, I hope, from any conduct of mine, said Catherine in a tone of great humility, for upon my honour I have done nothing this evening that can contribute to overthrow the establishment of the kingdom.'

'You are Mistaken Child, replied she; the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of it's individuals, and any one who offends in so gross a manner against decorum & propriety is certainly hastening it's ruin. You have been giving a bad example to the World, and the World is but too well disposed to receive such.' (*MW* 232–3)

Catharine now offends in another way – she fails in proper respect for her elders: ‘“Pardon me Madam . . . but I *can* have given an Example only to *You*, for You alone have seen the offence”’ (*MW* 233). She then contrives to distract her aunt from her diatribe and escapes further castigation. But contemporary readers would have a problem – Mrs Percival may be stupid, but is Catharine justified in being pert? Does Mrs Percival's stupidity invalidate the Burkean doctrine she is spouting? No rule of thumb could provide the answer, and neither narrator nor character directs the reader.

Why did Austen not go on with this novel? It is in many ways the best of the fragments, especially in its feisty central character, and we are disappointed to lose her so soon. She promises to be at least as delightful as Elizabeth Bennet, and is perhaps her forerunner. Brian Southam suggests that Austen lost control of the character, who failed to become a ‘single, unified personality’, but an uneasy amalgam of the mocked sentimental heroine, ‘a lively young woman of keen intelligence’ and ‘an *ingénue* of foolish simplicity’.⁸ I would suggest rather that the contradictions are deliberate. Elizabeth Bennet is all of these things at different times; Jane Austen was not in the business of creating ‘unified’ heroines – or heroes, for that matter. Indeed, it may have been the very fact of Catharine's complexity in contrast with the more obviously ‘unified’ characters

that caused Austen to abandon the project – the Edward Stanley/Catharine/Mrs Percival triangle seems too tight at the outset for fictional manoeuvre. No one in the story except Catharine seems likely to develop in any unforeseen way. Mrs Percival's single moral obsession does not promise to be anything like as productive of incident for the heroine as Mrs Bennet's and could become tedious. It is perhaps significant that the fragment ends with her pondering with growing anxiety 'the necessity of having some Gentleman to attend them' to the play. *Some* social life is necessary for a heroine, however unsentimental, to operate. Mrs Percival begins here to look like an insuperable obstacle (*MW* 240).

But *Catharine* provides plenty of indications of the way in which Austen's fiction was developing. The daughter of the Stanley family, Camilla, is given a mode of speech brilliantly exposing fashionable cant. As often as Catharine tries to persuade her into some sensible comment about the banishment of her friend Cecilia Wynne to Bengal in search of a husband, Camilla returns with a stock utterance, to the purport of which she has clearly given no thought whatever:

'But as to the Wynnes; do you really think them very fortunate?'

'Do I? Why, does not every body? Miss Halifax & Caroline & Maria all say they are the luckiest Creatures in the World. So does Sir George Fitzgibbon and so do Every body.'

'That is, Every body who have themselves conferred an obligation on them. But do you call it lucky, for a Girl of Genius & Feeling to be sent in quest of a Husband to Bengal, to be married there to a Man of whose Disposition she has no opportunity of judging till her Judgement is of no use to her, who may be a Tyrant, or a Fool or both for what she knows to the Contrary. Do you call *that* fortunate?'

'I know nothing of all that; I only know that it was extremely good in Sir George to fit her out and pay her Passage, and that she would not have found Many who would have done the same.'*(MW* 204–5)

The phrase 'in the world' is a particular favourite – the whole creation is brought into play for Camilla's expression of her supposed loves and hates; its emptiness of meaning is highlighted by Catharine's sardonic response:

'You cannot think how fond I am of him! By the bye are not you in love with him yourself?'

'To be sure I am replied Kitty laughing, I am in love with every handsome Man I see.'

‘That is just like me – I am always in love with every handsome Man in the World.’

‘There you outdo me replied Catherine for I am only in love with those I do see.’ (*MW* 222–3)

This is typical of Camilla, who is quite unable to sustain any rational dialogue; she is the forerunner of Mrs Palmer in *Sense and Sensibility*; and her conversational style is related to that of Lady Bertram’s letters – all surface and no substance, except that the latter comes alive at the onset of real feeling about the danger threatening her elder son (*MP* 427). Camilla, we see, cannot experience real feeling; though she sometimes gives way to emotion, it is all expressed through meaningless formulae and empty hyperbole: ‘“Well, I must say *this*, that I never was at a stupider Ball in my Life! But it always is so; I am always disappointed in them for some reason or other. I wish there were no such things”’, and, when she is jealous of Catharine’s success at the ball, ‘“I wish with all my heart that he [her brother Edward] had never come to England! I hope she may fall down & break her neck, or sprain her Ankle”’ (*MW* 225–6, 224). Moreover, and perhaps most damning, she pretends to judge books without reading them, as part of a general presentation of herself as fashionably in the swim. Eagerly questioned by Catharine about ‘“Mrs. Smith’s Novels”’ she replies, ‘“I am quite delighted with them – They are the sweetest things in the world – ”’, and proceeds to reveal that she knows nothing about *Emmeline*, and has found *Ethelinde* too long to be read in its entirety (*MW* 199).⁹

It may be that Austen became so fascinated with the reproduction of this sort of vacuous chatter that she overdoes Camilla; in the later novels this comic mode is used more sparingly and to greater effect. Neither John Thorpe nor Isabella’s invisible friend, Miss Andrews, has any staying power in the completion of standard popular works of fiction, but Catherine Morland is a far less knowing witness of their shortcomings and the interaction is more satisfying. Mrs Palmer and Robert Ferrars are minor irritants for Elinor Dashwood – she accepts them resignedly as a normal part of social life. Unlike Catharine, she concludes that such people do not deserve ‘the compliment of rational opposition’ (*SS* 252). As with other characters in *Catharine*, Camilla’s idiosyncracies have too much space given them and Catharine’s reactions become too predictable. It is difficult to see how the narrative can develop. What is clear is Austen’s interest in the hollow cant of social exchange, which goes along with

her impatience with fashionable fictional forms. Here we have both set in a scene of domestic realism with devastating effect, a formula which she will refine and perfect in the major novels.

Lady Susan is a very different matter. Many problems surround the dating of the manuscript, which survives as a fair copy on paper with an 1805 watermark. That its composition cannot be as late as this has been well established, and it is now usually thought to have been written in 1793–4, immediately after *Catharine* and before the first draft of *Sense and Sensibility*, 'Elinor and Marianne'. Both *Lady Susan* and 'Elinor and Marianne' were composed in the popular epistolary form, which Austen eventually abandoned. There have been many speculations as to the reasons for this change. However, if we accept that Austen's drive was towards complexity of character and an escape from moral paradigms, it is easy to see why the novel-in-letters did not suit her. In *Catharine* she had discovered free indirect style, which allowed the character to speculate about her own motives, to deceive herself and enlighten the reader through irony. When *Lady Susan* presents her motives differently to different correspondents, the deception is clear, but unsubtle – *Lady Susan* is unadulteratedly wicked, whereas *Catharine* is revealed as self-deceived, reacting ad hoc to situations as they arise and she leaves far more room for the reader to identify with her, to sympathise and sometimes condemn. It must have struck Austen that the possibilities in her kind of straight narrative for the manipulation of the reader's attention and allegiance are infinitely greater and require much less space than the exchange of letters. 'Elinor and Marianne', composed in this way, probably wrenched the central characters too close to moral stereotypes and left the reader with no doubts to resolve. Whatever the case, she put both *Lady Susan* and 'Elinor and Marianne' aside and began another novel in about 1796. 'First Impressions', the early draft of *Pride and Prejudice*, was probably not composed as letters, though this has been suggested.¹⁰ It must have been different from and in some way more impressive than the earlier work, for it was this manuscript which Jane Austen's father offered Cadell for publication in 1797. It was rejected and put aside, though it was still read aloud and enjoyed within the family. A version of *Northanger Abbey* called 'Susan', completed (according to Cassandra Austen) in 1798, was accepted by Crosby in 1803, but not published. Between that year and 1811, Austen recast 'Elinor and Marianne', tinkered with 'Susan' and wrote the fragment *The*

Watsons. We must now consider why, when, with one work rejected, one inexplicably shelved, she had had little encouragement from outside the family to believe that she would ever get a novel published, she decided to drop *The Watsons* (written circa 1804) in favour of 'Susan' and of *Sense and Sensibility*, which became the focus of her attention until 1811, when it was published.

This time the solution probably *does* lie with the conception of the heroine. The reader knows exactly where moral approval must be located – with Emma Watson herself, who, typically, finds herself surrounded by unscrupulous venality and cold egotism, but has no difficulty in sorting the good from the bad. Without being in the least like Gregory's ideal girl, she was too much in danger of becoming one of those 'pictures of perfection' which Austen later told Fanny Knight, made her 'sick & wicked'.¹¹ A heroine who consistently got things right would not do for the mature Austen. That this limitation could have been attended to there is no doubt, but it may be that much of *The Watsons* was incorporated into the eventual revision of 'First Impressions' that became *Pride and Prejudice*. This possibility will be explored in a later chapter. 'Elinor and Marianne' seems to have offered greater possibilities, once the epistolary form was abandoned, for double and treble reader-perception, for moral doubt and relativity.

'Susan' meanwhile was mouldering on Crosby's shelf. But Austen had another copy¹² and probably revised it between 1803 and 1816 when the copyright was bought back by 'one of her brothers'¹³ – possibly she began the revision around 1809 when there seem to have been new plans for its publication. Certainly the heroine's name was changed before 1817;¹⁴ R. W. Chapman conjectures 1809, from there having been another *Susan* published anonymously in that year (*NA* xii). The original conception of the novel may have been very early – close to *Catharine* – for even in its final form it is more schematic in its engagement with popular fiction than any of the other completed novels and is much closer to burlesque (though it is clear even from this novel that Austen has moved on to a more complex kind of fiction). Catherine Morland is set up from the outset as an anti-heroine. She has none of the characteristics of novel-heroines; she is not an orphan, but somewhat over-provided with near relations; she is not beautiful but 'very plain', only rising by fifteen to 'almost pretty'; nor is she clever – 'she never could learn or understand any thing before she was taught' (*NA* 13–15). Of the

contemporary novels which Austen knew, Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* is the most obvious target. Emmeline, despite being brought up parentless in a half-ruined castle, has somehow acquired both dignity and accomplishments. She has 'a kind of intuitive knowledge; and comprehended every thing with a facility that soon left her instructors [the old steward and the semi-literate housekeeper] behind'; 'she endeavoured to cultivate a genius for drawing' – it will be recalled that Catherine's 'greatest deficiency was in the pencil' (NA 16) – and secretly makes a sketch of Delamere, her importunate lover, which he discovers.¹⁵ Catherine, on the other hand, 'fell miserably short of the true heroic height ... for she had no lover to pourtray' (NA 16). Scenes of abduction, including Delamere's of Emmeline, are parodied in the efforts of John Thorpe to force Catherine into an expedition to Blaize Castle. Thus Emmeline:

'No! No!' cried she – 'never! never! I have passed my honour to Lord Montreville. It is sacred – I cannot, I will not forfeit it! ... Let me go back to the house, Mr. Delamere; or from this moment I shall consider you as having taken advantage of my unprotected state ... to offer me the grossest outrage.'¹⁶

And Catherine:

'Stop, stop, Mr. Thorpe ... it is Miss Tilney; it is indeed. How could you tell me they were gone? – Stop, stop, I will get out this moment and go to them ... How could you deceive me so Mr. Thorpe? – How could you say, that you saw them driving up the Landsdown-road? ... You do not know how vexed I am. –' (NA 87)

But the critique of popular fiction (there are many similarly talented heroines and dramatic abductions) here moves on to a different level, for it not only ridicules novelistic stereotypical characters and situations, but defeats the reader's expectation of a burlesque on the style of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, or Sheridan's *The Rivals*,¹⁷ by making Catherine, at least at first, very sensible and quite unaware of any parallel with her reading in the rather low-key excitements of her social life or the bullying behaviour of the Thorpes and her brother. In Lennox's novel, Arabella, having been totally isolated from the world, has read nothing but 'bad translations' of seventeenth-century French romances, chiefly originating from the pen of Madeleine de Scudéry.¹⁸ She finally emerges to engage with mid-eighteenth society in the manner of a romance heroine, whose lovers must either earn her regard by

suffering in various ways or be categorised as potential ‘Ravishers’. The resulting high comedy, combined with exposure of the shallow artificiality of fashionable social life in the 1750s, was relished by Austen; she read the novel more than once.¹⁹ But she herself aimed to do more than confront the banal with the fantastic; Arabella’s fantasies and Lydia Languish’s dreams of a romance-style elopement are amusing, but relatively straightforward – Austen was intent on complicating the fictional message, and in *Northanger Abbey* she does it very thoroughly. Catherine is, at the opening of the novel, a burlesque of a burlesque – the diametric opposite of Arabella, for *her* minimal education and uncomplicated family situation have made romantic dreams unnecessary. Life is quite exciting enough and her pleasures are simple. But she is nevertheless in danger, not from unruly lovers or delusions of high romance, but from other people’s reconstructions of everyday life. Apparently *in statu pupillari* she has in fact no effective adviser. Henry Tilney cannot function as the good Doctor does for Arabella, for he has too many problems of his own. At the end of the novel Catherine still has her best guide in her own naive reactions, which at various times in her story have *appeared* quite indefensible, but are revealed to be nearer the actuality than anything indicated by those who might be supposed to be capable of advising her.

Instead of caricaturing inadequate guardians as she had done in *Catharine*, Austen produces parents for her heroine who are superficially ideal but in practice unhelpful. They are neither cruel, neglectful nor venal, but dutiful and caring, comfortably provided with the necessities of life. They have no problems. But underneath the cheerfully reassuring description of the down-to-earth rational family that appears in the first chapter there is an ironic critique. Catherine’s education has been conventional and not very thorough or effective, consisting chiefly in learning improving texts and bits of English literature by heart. Mrs Morland ‘wished to see her children every thing they ought to be’ (NA 15) but her bustling, energetic life leaves no room for subtleties or what she would regard as romantic nonsense. It is difficult to imagine any of her children consulting her about anything more complicated than clean underwear. When Catherine leaves for Bath she confines her advice to care for her health and her money; she assumes that the ordinary habits and regulations of society will take care of everything else. She has no time for details. But her bluff optimism is called in question, if only

by implication; she cheerfully hands over Catherine to begin her adult life with Mrs Allen, a woman who she must know is quite outstandingly stupid and will be no help whatever to Catherine, even in the most ordinary decisions of everyday life. Somehow, she seems to be thinking, things will sort themselves out; her daughter will pick up the information she needs. Like many parents, she chooses to forget the problems of her own youth and pretends to herself that everything is simple. Like Mrs Percival, when the going gets rough she looks for a book which will, she fondly imagines, put her daughter back on the rational track, though she quite mistakes the cause of Catherine's unease on her return from Northanger, thinking, according to the stereotype, that she has been 'spoilt for home by great acquaintance' (*NA* 241). She is, in fact, very ordinary, but in an Austen novel, plain common sense is not always an inevitable route to rational action.

Initially, Mrs Morland's brisk inattention to the things outside the family which will shape Catherine's life has produced a quite untroubled young woman, for Catherine, never having been forced with any great vigour to do what she did not like – she shirks her lessons, and is allowed to give up music after a year's struggle – has no perception that life may produce difficulties, and has no thoughts which she could not reveal to her mother, until her collision with the Tilney family. At the beginning of her story she is totally unaffected by her reading of novels, which she has enjoyed, 'provided they were all story and no reflection' (*NA*, 15), and has no expectation that her life will mirror fiction. As she sets out for what turns out to be a boring and frustrating evening at the Upper Rooms, she only 'hoped at least to pass uncensured through the crowd. As for admiration, it was always very welcome when it came, but she did not depend on it' and 'her humble vanity was contented' when 'two gentlemen pronounced her to be a pretty girl' (*NA* 20–4). Delamere, on the other hand, when he first sees Emmeline, 'fixing his eyes on her face with a look of admiration and enquiry that extremely abashed her . . . seemed to be examining the beauties of that lovely and interesting countenance which had so immediately dazzled and surprised him'.²⁰ Echoes of *The Female Quixote* are also detectable in Austen's Bath episodes. The stir of Arabella's arrival is in sharp contrast to the invisibility of Catherine. Unlike Arabella, Catherine is in no wise brought to suspect her two low-key admirers of plans to 'carry her off'; nor has she any propensity to impose tasks on her lovers in the

manner of the heroines of Mlle de Scudéry.²¹ For a large part of the novel she is in grave doubt as to whether she has a lover at all; she never for a moment takes John Thorpe's pretensions seriously, and Henry keeps her guessing until the very end.

So Catherine is, on her first introduction to the world, neither like Emmeline, who knows the right moves by instinct, nor Arabella, so bemused by her reading that she cannot tell reality from fiction. When Henry Tilney parodies the fashionable preoccupations of the average novel-heroine, she reacts in amused disbelief because so far she thinks of such behaviour as occurring only between the covers of a book (*NA* 26–7). She is unable to join in Isabella's pseudo-romantic prattle – ‘she was not experienced enough in the finesse of love, or the duties of friendship, to know when delicate raillery was properly called for, or when a confidence should be forced’ (*NA* 36). Isabella is, but Catherine cannot rise to the occasion. Isabella effuses in the sentimental novel style but Catherine can produce nothing but common sense:

‘Where the heart is really attached, I know very well how little one can be pleased with the attention of any body else. Every thing is so insipid, so uninteresting, that does not relate to the beloved object! I can perfectly comprehend your feelings.’

‘But you should not persuade me that I think so very much about Mr. Tilney, for perhaps I may never see him again.’

‘Not see him again! My dearest creature, do not talk of it. I am sure you would be miserable if you thought so.’

‘No, indeed, I should not . . .’ (*NA* 41)

Catherine is safe at least from the excesses of sensibility. But the reader has a double perception, and it is this layering of the reader's response that is the innovative aspect of this novel. The heroine's down-to-earth reactions are at one and the same time sensible and impossibly naive. By failing to interpret the codes of other people's discourse Catherine is made resistant to cant, because it makes no sort of sense to her, and at the same time extremely vulnerable, not to seducers and robbers, but to persons living according to a fiction which she does not understand and which she is not able to share. She is reasonably proof against Isabella's mixture of sentimental claptrap and selfish ambition, which does not damage her although she is so slow to recognise it; she is not long deceived by John Thorpe's vision of himself as a dashing man-about-town. But she is seriously taken in by the Tilney family, for the internal dynamics of

which she has received no sort of model in her own life. It is here that Gothic fantasy and real life mesh for Catherine; for the first time her reading is her only guide.

General Tilney is as immediately recognisable to the modern reader as he must have been at the turn of the nineteenth century as the archetypal domestic tyrant. But nothing in Catherine's experience could have prepared her for him, and recognition of the reality comes to her much more slowly than it does in the case of Isabella and her dreadful brother. Mr Allen, who fills the space usually occupied in novels by a sensible and reliable male guide, has only the duty to discover that the Tilneys are 'a very respectable family'; it would not be his business, even if he knew all about it, to warn Catherine that General Tilney was grasping, irascible, overbearing, insincere and despotic; such things were by no means incompatible with respectability and were irrelevant to his enquiry. With the introduction of the General, Austen engages with a third fictional mode, already part of Catherine's experience, but not so far of the action of the novel – Radcliffian Gothic. General Tilney is capable, not of sensational betrayals on the grand scale, but of petty domestic cruelty. Later, for Catherine, he acquires 'the air and attitude of a Montoni', and she is sure that he must have a guilty secret (*NA* 187); but he operates in the open – he is socially acceptable; he walks the streets in daylight and has no need to hide. Mr Allen of course does not recognise him. He therefore retreats to the card-room and pays little more attention. The only time he advises Catherine is in the matter of the impropriety of young ladies driving with young men in open carriages – when she has in fact already refused to go. For the rest of the time she is left to the stupidities of his wife. Whereas Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is isolated from the everyday world among people with mysterious and terrifying purposes, Catherine, in a typical Austen subversion, moves about among a perfectly ordinary crowd of companions who have no apparently nefarious agendas, but are only selfish, ignorant, obtuse or, to her (but not to the reader), impenetrable. No 'blood glare[s] upon the stairs',²² but Austen's readers are rendered almost as uneasy for Catherine as Radcliffe's are for Emily as soon as General Tilney appears on the scene.

As the friendship between Catherine, Henry and Eleanor develops, the reader is increasingly aware of what Catherine fails to understand, that the young Tilneys are in a state of unusual

subjection to their father. Henry will not, until his treatment of Catherine precipitates a quarrel, fall out with his father – apparently on principle, for he proves to be financially independent; Eleanor has no choice. Both tolerate their situation and repress their reactions; their superior education and cultivated habits impress Catherine, who mistakes their sophisticated demeanour for happiness. Even Frederick, though his absence from home leaves him more freedom, and he is less unwilling to offend him, feels the weight of the authority exercised by the General over his family. Catherine is intermittently puzzled by the effect that he has on his children’s spirits, and cannot account for her own discomfort in his presence. Isabella’s melodramatic reconstruction of Catherine’s description of her first visit to their lodgings (“Such insolence of behaviour as Miss Tilney’s she had never heard of in her life! Not to do the honours of her house with common good-breeding! – To behave to her guest with such superciliousness! – Hardly even to speak to her!”), based as it is on the stereotypes of sentimental fiction, ‘did not influence her friend’ (*NA* 129–31) – she does not connect her own experience with her reading in this particular way, because she is conscious of genuine regard in Henry and Eleanor. But she cannot explain the General, and gradually comes to connect him in her mind with her most recent reading – *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the ‘horrid’ novels mentioned in chapter six of the first volume.²³ There she finds male tyrants and helpless female victims in plenty. Although at the time Catherine appears undisturbed by Henry Tilney’s melodramatic construction of a Gothic romance – her reactions evince relish rather than anxiety (“I am sure your housekeeper is not really Dorothy. – Well, what then?” “Oh! no, no – do not say so. Well, go on”) (*NA* 159–60) – his teasing and Northanger Abbey itself ultimately work upon her imagination. Impressions of horror rush in to fill the vacuum left by her education; because she cannot find any other explanation for the behaviour of General Tilney, she interprets the evidence as proof that he is guilty of an unspeakable crime, which weighs upon his conscience and renders him irritable and anti-social. The reader is made well aware that the General’s chief preoccupation as he introduces Catherine to the Abbey is the best way to display his wealth. But to Catherine, unacquainted as she is with acquisitiveness on this scale, his manoeuvrings inevitably appear sinister. Her internal monologue, as she works herself up into a state of luxurious apprehension in chapters 6

to 9 of the second volume, has much to do with her obscure sense of exclusion in a family grappling with its own tensions. The behaviour of Henry and Eleanor in the presence of their father still puzzles her, as does his own. She tries to convince herself that all is well:

'In a house so furnished and so guarded, she could have nothing to explore or to suffer . . . How glad I am that Northanger is what it is! If it had been like some other places, I do not know that, in such a night as this, I could have answered for my courage: – but now, to be sure, there is nothing to alarm one.' (NA 167)

In a sense, throughout this episode Catherine knows at one level that her alarms are ridiculous; but Austen's subversion of the Gothic plot has far more complexity than the usual burlesque of it (for instance, in Barrett's *The Heroine*).²⁴ Catherine's problems are real. All is not well in that house, as she is acutely aware. Gothic fantasy displaces more tangible worries and eventually focuses on the General himself. Patrolling the house in secret in search of evidence for her sensational suspicions, Catherine finds nothing to add to the knowledge that she already has, if she would only recognise it – that General Tilney is addicted to power and can do without love. When she discovers nothing but 'an handsome dimity bed, arranged as unoccupied with an housemaid's care' (NA 193) – surely the most succinct and complete expression of solid domestic comfort imaginable – and is herself discovered by Henry, he clearly knows quite well what is troubling Catherine. But he cannot enlighten her. He cannot, because of current standards of filial respect, say, 'My father is a cruel and hateful man and that is why you feel as you do.' But what he does say only acquits the General of the worst of Catherine's suspicions. Of his father's treatment of his wife he has this to say:

'He loved her, I am persuaded, as well as it was possible for him to – We have not all, you know, the same tenderness of disposition – and I will not pretend to say that while she lived, she might not often have had much to bear, but though his temper injured her, his judgment never did. His value of her was sincere; and, if not permanently, he was truly afflicted by her death.' (NA 197)

This hardly exonerates him altogether, for it is clear that being judged of value by someone is no consolation for being injured by his temper. But Henry proceeds to fudge any admission he has made by insisting on the way in which Catherine appears to have subverted the Gothic-novel scenario:

‘If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to – Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you – Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?’ (*NA* 197–8)

But none of these things has prevented General Tilney, by his own son’s admission, from being the apparently unrepentant source of great unhappiness. In her self-castigation in the next chapter, Catherine forgets this, and, condemning herself for Arabella-like delusions, concludes only that General Tilney is ‘not perfectly amiable’ – a profound understatement so long as we are not judging him upon the standards of the Gothic novel. She is ultimately to discover that he is at the mercy of his ambition and pride to the exclusion of all feeling either for his children or for her, and when he throws her out of his house reflects ‘that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty’ (*NA* 247). Catherine’s education is complete – she has always been proof against the codes of sentimental fiction; having now recognised the existence of real everyday inhumanity, she no longer needs the tropes of Gothic romance to explain it. It is, after all, only too common, and the General is clearly not regarded as a villain by anyone else. He continues to be as ‘respectable’ as Mr Allen’s enquiries found him to be. But it is ultimately her own experience which enlightens Catherine – no one has been free to help her. Arabella was more fortunate. Henry is too personally involved to function as the good doctor does at the end of *The Female Quixote*, though his arguments are somewhat similar. Arabella’s adviser urges her to test her perceptions against everyday observation, much as Henry does for Catherine; but the shadow of the tyrannical husband and father will not thereby be dissipated.

Thus Austen complicates the interplay of fictional forms and leaves the reader unsure whether to approve or disapprove of the heroine, who has been both eminently sagacious and egregiously

silly; and we might be equally ambivalent about the hero, whom we could accuse of pusillanimous subjection to his father's commands at the expense of Catherine, though he finally makes up for his shortcomings. Well-meaning minor characters like Mrs Morland and Mr Allen fail to save the heroine from her unpleasant adventures, though there is nothing in their behaviour for which they can be exactly blamed. This blurring of the moral focus was new in fiction – so new that it was almost universally ignored in the initial reception of the novels. But to Austen it became almost an addiction, and in the revisions of her early drafts she increasingly undermines expectation of coherent, consistent action among her cast of characters. The one or two thoroughgoing villains are vastly outnumbered by the morally ambivalent, the dubious, the obtuse. This novel produces one of Austen's equivocal closures, which, chiming ironically with the last paragraph but one of *Udolpho*, makes a clear statement of Austen's fictional policy of leaving the reader to work things out. Ann Radcliffe thus sums up the purport of her work, leaving no room for argument:

O! useful may it be to have shewn, that, though the vicious can sometimes pour affliction upon the good, their power is transient and their punishment certain; and that innocence, though oppressed by injustice, shall, supported by patience, finally triumph over misfortune!²⁵

That Austen thought this more than a touch simplistic is clear from her alternative, which is a bundle of oblique and uncommitted comment on the unstable nature of accepted social mores and their treatment in fiction:

professing myself . . . convinced that the General's unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience. (*NA* 252)

The closure also presents readers with a conventional happy ending which is calculated to remind them that the domestic life of Henry and Catherine, unlike that of Emily and Valancourt, will be fraught with family tensions.²⁶ The meeting of Mrs Morland and General Tilney is awful to contemplate. In addition, Catherine will have to cope with the undying hostility between James and her new brother-in-law, Captain Tilney; and the mind boggles at the impact

of Catherine's eight other siblings on General Tilney's network of aristocratic connections. But Austen has worse in store – already Mrs Bennet exists in draft to plague Darcy and infuriate Lady Catherine de Bourgh.