

# General Tilney and Tyranny:

## *Northanger Abbey*

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**N**orthanger Abbey falls short of Catherine Morland's expectations from the first. At the entrance to its grounds, the lodges present "a modern appearance" (p. 161); the furniture of the drawing room is "in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste" (p. 162).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Northanger Abbey turns out to be far from what Catherine's eager imagination has pictured to herself, and the contrast between her expectation of "a fine old place" (p. 157) and the glaring newness which everywhere meets her eye heightens the comical effect of the Abbey scenes in the novel. This contrast, however, serves not merely to expose the naïvety of a girl addicted to novels; it also highlights the peculiar inclinations of General Tilney, the owner of Northanger, who has transformed an ancient abbey into a place for exhibiting modern products and inventions. The General's love of improvement and novelty is indeed almost as obsessive as Catherine's yearning for ruins and antiquities. Catherine's naïvety is also revealed through her fantastic adventures; fancifully identifying the General with such fictional villains as Montoni, she looks for evidence of imaginary guilt. This confusion of fiction and reality, while testifying to her simplicity, is an illuminating comment on the character of the General as an avaricious despot. General Tilney deserves our close attention in his own right; he by no means functions merely as a subject of Catherine's study. If he is a man of mystery—a puzzle to solve—to Catherine, so he is to the modern reader. The General has a passion for improvement and novelty, and Jane Austen underlines his

<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, vol. 5 in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 161, 162. References are to this edition.

enthusiasm by describing his possessions and activities with a minuteness unusual for her. But what is her purpose in doing so? Is it only to laugh at the vanity of a wealthy, worldly-minded landowner? Along with these questions, we must consider carefully why the General is connected with Gothic villains. Catherine's Gothic adventures are out of tune with the rest of the book, and there must have been some important reason that the author would risk such dissonance. Jane Austen certainly implies more about the General than she makes explicit; to grasp her meaning it is necessary to find links between the images associated with the General and contemporary political and social conditions. His character as a domestic autocrat is a key to the complicated message the author tries to convey.

Jane Austen twice uses the word "tyranny." In the opening paragraph we are told that Catherine "was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny" (p. 14). And in the closing passage, which parodies the moralizing cliché of contemporary novels, we find the phrase "parental tyranny" (p. 252). "Parental tyranny" refers, of course, to General Tilney. He is a despot, "accustomed on every ordinary occasion to give the law in his family" (p. 247). His binding authority is such that he is "always a check upon his children's spirits" (p. 156). As a character he is rather simplified; described from outside and with exaggeration, General Tilney may be called a caricature or a "flat" character. Yet Jane Austen's representation of his despotism is subtle. Alistair Duckworth observes that his domestic tyranny is revealed in his exacting demand of punctuality from his family; he betrays an extraordinary degree of impatience and irritation with any delay, and certainly "his obsessive attitude toward time," as Duckworth puts it, bespeaks his inexorable martinettish disposition.<sup>2</sup> But more than this, all the essential characteristics of tyranny are quite skilfully embodied in General Tilney; and when we combine his tyrannical personality with the images associated with him, this caricatured figure begins to assume a grave and even sinister character.



In the "Advertisement" to *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1816 in preparation for its publication, Jane Austen requests the reader to bear in mind that the work, while finished in 1803, was begun much earlier, and the social background belongs to the period of its original composition. This

2 Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 99.

note is testimony to Jane Austen's scrupulous regard for accuracy of detail in her works; along with her concern for the fidelity of her portrait of society, however, perhaps there was some necessity for her to inform readers that the novel is set in the late 1790s. In fact, the historical context of the 1790s plays an important role in *Northanger Abbey*.

The 1790s in England were marked by the alarm caused by the political upheaval in France: The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 shook England profoundly, but as the Revolution proceeded its impact on English life grew stronger. The escalation of violence, from the September Massacres in 1792 to the Reign of Terror in 1793-94, aroused intense fears. The English people not only shuddered at the bloody incidents in France but were afraid that these would spread by contagion to England. In the early 1790s London was at times disturbed by riots, and, if the Jacobins were not actually concerned in them, it was widely believed that they were. And in 1795 there were large-scale and highly seditious gatherings of radicals, such as the one in St George's Field. The Pitt government adopted rigorous measures to repress the activities of radicals, which were fairly successful; but the subversive tension that permeated the nation could not be wholly dispelled. We can glimpse this atmosphere of anxiety in *Northanger Abbey*. In chapter 14, during the course of the walk on Beechen Cliff, Eleanor Tilney mistakes Catherine's remark about a forthcoming horror novel for a reference to an impending riot, and her brother Henry, amused at her misapprehension, makes fun of her by giving a facetious description of a London riot. Considering the actual state of affairs in the 1790s, however, Eleanor is by no means over-imaginative, nor is Henry's representation of a riot an unrealistic fairy-tale, as he tries to make it appear. As B.C. Southam observes, "Eleanor's misunderstanding and Tilney's joke touch upon circumstances bizarrely close to the truth" of the time.<sup>3</sup>

The 1790s was a period in which the Gothic novel had an enormous vogue. While this interesting phenomenon may be traced back to various causes of a literary, intellectual, and social nature, one important contributing factor was the impact of the French Revolution, as Ronald Paulson has pointed out: "the popularity of Gothic fiction in the 1790s and well into the nineteenth century was due in part to the widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France."<sup>4</sup> The anxieties and fears of this period are also the salient features of Gothic fiction, especially the works of the Radcliffean school. Ann Radcliffe, the

3 B.C. Southam, "'Regulated Hatred' Revisited," in *Jane Austen: "Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion": A Casebook*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 125.

4 Ronald Paulson, "Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution," *ELH* 48 (1981), 536.

most popular and influential Gothic novelist of the time, presents heroines who are in some way or other persecuted by ruthless villains; in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), for example, the heroine Emily is imprisoned in the castle Udolpho by the avaricious and cruel desperado Montoni. An innocent girl seized with anxieties and fears under the threat of violence by an oppressive villain could be seen as an image of England in the 1790s. Many observers in England, Paulson says, "by 1793 saw the brutally oppressed masses of France usurping the tyrannical roles of their erstwhile oppressors,"<sup>5</sup> and the fanatical violence of that tyrannical force was what those English observers were most afraid of. The Gothic novel has often been regarded as an escape from reality, but the reality of the day in fact propelled the terror of its fiction.

With traits suggestive of the French revolutionaries, the Gothic villains in English fiction served as emblems of the French menace. Villains in Gothic novels are in many cases slaves to their passions. In *Udolpho* Emily is warned by her father against "excessive indulgence," and her moderation is juxtaposed with "the wild energy of passion" of Montoni, a man "in whom passions ... entirely supplied the place of principles."<sup>6</sup> Such unrestrained passion is characteristic, not only of Montoni, but of almost every other villain of Gothic fiction, and, as Paulson points out, "the 'wild energy' of Montoni is what Burke associates with the French rabble."<sup>7</sup> Together with unbridled passion, Gothic villains are also linked to the Revolution in their assumption of unlimited power. Criticizing the drastic measures taken in France, Burke remarks that if "the engagement and pact of society" are set at naught, "competence and power would soon be confounded, and no law be left but the will of a prevailing force."<sup>8</sup> Burke's prediction about the abuse of power was soon to be realized in the Reign of Terror, and the tyranny of the Revolution bears a close analogy with the behaviour of Gothic villains, who also admit no law but their own will. It is worth noting that in committing atrocities those villains frequently try to justify themselves in an arbitrary way. In *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), for example, the Marquis de Montalt, deprecating the laws of a civilized country as "prejudices" and "false refinement," and alleging one's advantages or "unconquerable passions" as ample justification for murder, enjoins La Motte to put Adeline to

5 Paulson, p. 536.

6 Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 21, 329, 435.

7 Paulson, p. 543.

8 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 105.

death. Characteristically, the Marquis calls his creed "truth."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Eleanor Sleath's *The Orphan of the Rhine* (1798), the Marchese de Montferrat, following the advice of his servant Paoli, decides to murder Laurette with a plea of "self-preservation."<sup>10</sup> But the most impressive example of perverted self-justification is found in the conference scene between the Marchesa di Vivaldi and Father Schedoni in *The Italian* (1797). Both the Marchesa and Schedoni have reasons—egoistic, more or less—for wanting to get rid of Ellena Rosalba, the lady-love of the Marchesa's son, and in this murder-plotting scene the Marchesa allows herself to be persuaded by the sophistry of Schedoni, who calls Ellena's murder "justice" or "virtue."<sup>11</sup> In *The Italian*, the Inquisition plays the role of oppressive villain. In the prison of the Inquisition Vivaldi is filled with "astonishment and indignation of the sufferings, which the frenzied wickedness of man prepares for man, who, even at the moment of infliction, insults his victim with assertions of the justice and necessity of such procedure."<sup>12</sup> The readers of the 1790s would have associated such abuse of power, particularly when accompanied by far-fetched self-justification, with the slaughter perpetrated in France in the name of Revolution; Vivaldi's astonishment and indignation at the inhumanity of the Inquisition represents English emotions about the tyranny of the Revolution.

Seen against this background, the comparison of General Tilney with Gothic villains takes on a greater significance, even though the comparison is made by the naïve Catherine. The General is not a murderer, nor does he confine his wife, as Catherine imagines; but her comparison is amply justified by his final "violence"—her abrupt dismissal from Northanger. When Henry enlightens her as to the reasons for his father's conduct, Catherine feels "that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (p. 247). If the novel had been published when the author originally intended—at a time when the bloody incidents in France were still vivid in the people's minds—then it would not have been difficult for the contemporary reader to perceive the shadow of the tyranny of the Revolution behind the dictatorial General Tilney. I do

9 Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 222–23.

10 Eleanor Sleath, *The Orphan of the Rhine*, ed. Devendra P. Varma (London: Folio Press, 1968), pp. 253–54.

11 Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, ed. Frederick Garber (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 166–78.

12 *The Italian*, p. 198.

not mean to suggest, however, that the General is a radical or revolutionary. Jane Austen projected the image of the violence of the Revolution on the General in order to intimate the horror of tyranny; the French Revolution afforded a glaring and graphic example.

Tyranny, however, was by no means a monopoly of France; the 1790s saw the rise of a reactionary tyranny in England. In 1793 and 1794 leaders of radical groups were arrested and tried, some transported; in 1794 Habeas Corpus was temporarily suspended, making possible the imprisonment of political suspects without trial; legislation was passed, including the Treasonable Practices Act and the Seditious Meetings Act of 1795, which notably restricted the activities of dissidents.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, voluntary movements of citizens developed. In 1792 John Reeves, a legal historian, founded the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers in order to conduct a reactionary campaign. The activities of the Association were supported by the government, but the general public also co-operated. Under the leadership of the Association local societies, organized "in every quarter of the nation," were zealous "to move against seditious meetings and publications, to bring offenders to justice," and "to stand in readiness to aid the executive power and magistrates in the suppression of any riots or tumults."<sup>14</sup>

While the associations themselves were soon to dissolve (owing to their success), the habit of local citizens volunteering information about seditious activities remained, and was made use of by the government. E.P. Thompson remarks that, in order to stifle the activities of reformers, "the authorities were prompted to employ spies and informers on a scale unknown in any other period." The information furnished tended to be exaggerated or even fabricated, but the government encouraged it: "To isolate and terrorize potential revolutionaries, it was possible to adopt a policy of deliberate provocation."<sup>15</sup> In *The Friend* Coleridge wrote: "in England, when the alarm was at the highest, there was not a city, no, not a town in which a man suspected of holding democratic principles could move abroad without receiving some unpleasant proof of the hatred in which his supposed opinions were held by the great majority of the

13 Cf. Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 22-23.

14 Eugene Charlton Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization 1769-1793* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 237, 239.

15 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 529-30.

people."<sup>16</sup> As he relates in the tenth chapter of his *Biographia Literaria*, in Somerset, in 1796, he and Wordsworth, suspected of being French spies, were reported to the government by local residents. As Southam and Warren Roberts point out, there was a political and social background behind Henry Tilney's famous observation that England is a country "where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies" (p. 198).<sup>17</sup>

In relation to the political atmosphere of the 1790s, Robert Hopkins propounds a very interesting view of General Tilney.<sup>18</sup> After touring the grounds and the Abbey, at the close of the evening when the others are going to retire, the General announces, somewhat pompously, his intention of sitting up a little longer:

"I have many pamphlets to finish," said he to Catherine, "before I can close my eyes; and perhaps may be poring over the affairs of the nation for hours after you are asleep. Can either of us be more meetly employed? *My* eyes will be blinding for the good of others; and *yours* preparing by rest for future mischief." (p. 187)

This nightly duty of the General is mysterious enough to induce the fanciful Catherine to suspect that the pamphlet-reading is a hocus-pocus pretence to cover some dark proceedings, but also to puzzle the modern reader. Hopkins maintains, however, that "had *Northanger Abbey* been published in the late 1790s or early 1800s Jane Austen's readers would have instantly caught the significance of the General's duties." He concludes that "General Tilney's duties at night were as an inquisitor surveying possibly seditious pamphlets";<sup>19</sup> the General, that is, is one of the "voluntary spies." Hopkins's hypothesis is ingenious and entirely tenable; the General's character and the contemporary political and social conditions support this proposition. Although it may appear inconsistent with his revolutionary image to see the General as a reactionary patriot who volunteers to take action against Jacobinism (indeed, just before that pamphlet-reading passage Catherine perceives in the gloomily pacing General "the air and attitude of a Montoni"), this is not necessarily so; the extremes of Revolution and Reaction meet in tyranny. If the brutal violence in France was one extreme manifestation of tyranny,

16 *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols, *The Friend* I, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 4:218-19. This essay originally appeared in *The Friend* no. 10 (19 October 1809).

17 Southam, "'Regulated Hatred' Revisited," pp. 123-24; Roberts, pp. 27-31.

18 Robert Hopkins, "General Tilney and Affairs of State: The Political Gothic of *Northanger Abbey*," *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978), 213-24.

19 Hopkins, pp. 218, 220.

the stern repression of revolutionary or reform movements in England was another. Coleridge remarks that "to withstand the arguments of the lawless, the Anti-jacobins proposed to suspend the Law, and by the interposition of a particular statute to eclipse the blessed light of the universal Sun, that spies and informers might tyrannize and escape in the ominous darkness."<sup>20</sup> Jane Austen subtly projects the image of those patriots onto General Tilney to remind her readers of the actual nightmarish tyranny of their own country.

Thus the Reaction, like the Revolution, offered an illustrative example of tyranny. General Tilney offers an illustration of the essential characteristic—or mechanism, one may say—of tyranny common to both of them. In the pamphlet-reading passage the General says: "My eyes will be blinding for the good of others." If his nightly duty is to inspect pamphlet literature for seditious contents, the phrase "for the good of others" takes on a sinister connotation. It is customary for the General to allege some specious reasons—the benefit of others or their convenience—rather than his own desires or intentions. He invites Catherine to Northanger Abbey for mercenary reasons, yet he does so as if for the sake of his daughter Eleanor. When, deferring showing her round the Abbey, he takes Catherine outdoors, it is because he wishes to take the air at his usual hour; yet he says he yields to her desire as if it were against his own inclination. These are trivial examples, but they afford a glimpse into the working of his mind. For a man like the General a cause supplies a pretext and a cover: a pretext to impose one's will, opinions, or principles; and a cover to conceal selfish purposes, from oneself as well as from others. Indeed, we could say that the self-deception or self-absorption under the pretext of some worthy cause is an attribute of tyranny, and those who believe themselves fighting for a great cause are capable of any action, however outrageous or cruel that action may be. General Tilney's behaviour illustrates the mechanism of tyranny. Jane Austen believed that fundamentally the same mechanism was at work in the political world of both France and England in the 1790s.



But tyranny is not necessarily a phenomenon peculiar to the political world. At a period when industry was developing rapidly, Jane Austen noticed the spread of another form of tyranny, and it is again in General Tilney that this tyranny is incarnated. In the scenes of the conducted



tour of the grounds and the Abbey various things are shown to Catherine one after another—an enormous kitchen garden, gorgeous household equipment, objects of domestic utility, and so on. These are treated with considerable detail, and Southam, taking notice of this unusual minuteness, insists upon the necessity of historical insight into the matter.<sup>21</sup> To grasp its full meaning it is necessary to understand how the gentry concerned themselves with and contributed to the development of industry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It has been argued that in Jane Austen's novels the landowning classes are represented as degenerating and losing strength, and their decline—economic as well as moral—is usually contrasted with the vitality and new virtues of the rising middle classes. Yet David Spring asserts that this view is not founded on historical reality.<sup>22</sup> According to him, eighteenth-century English landowners were far from being effete; they were powerful as a governing class, and were to remain so throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, as a businesslike, capitalist class, they were making remarkable progress economically. During the *Beechen Cliff* episode Henry Tilney refers to "the inclosure" in "his short disquisition on the state of the nation" (p. 111). The late eighteenth century was in fact a period in which the enclosure movement was at its height, enhancing the economic prosperity of landowners. On their enlarged estates they carried out extensive improvements in agriculture and their success brought them large profits. Indeed, they were quite assiduous in pursuing profit, and in this respect had much in common with merchants and manufacturers. Landowners by no means swam against the current; rather, they made an important contribution to industrial development. Spring writes:

Although English landowners were not commercial or industrial capitalists, they were agrarian capitalists. In their own sphere, they were economic modernizers, in no important sense hostile to other spheres of economic modernity; on the contrary, by reason of the importance of agriculture in the national economy, they helped mightily in generating England's pioneering achievement, the industrial revolution, and managed as well to derive profit from it.<sup>23</sup>

The landowning classes, then, making common cause with the middle classes, took the lead in the industrial revolution. Putting particular em-

21 B.C. Southam, "General Tilney's Hot-houses: Some Recent Jane Austen Studies and Texts," *Ariel* 2 (1971), 55-56 and 59-61. See also his "Sanditon: The Seventh Novel" in *Jane Austen's Achievement*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 1-26; in this article Southam himself makes an attempt at an historical interpretation of this matter.

22 David Spring, "Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World: Literary Critics and Historians," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd, *Women and Literature* n.s. 3 (1983), 53-72.

23 Spring, p. 64.

phasis on their acquisitive attitude, Spring remarks that "theirs was a capitalist money culture."<sup>24</sup>

Now, among the many landowners in Jane Austen's novels, none lives up to Spring's description better than General Tilney. His estate is extensive, including Woodston as well as Northanger, and he boasts to Catherine that his eldest son Frederick "will perhaps inherit as considerable a landed property as any private man in the country" (p. 176). The extent of his estate is symbolized by the kitchen garden, whose vast scale astounds Catherine:

The number of acres contained in this garden was such as Catherine could not listen to without dismay. ... The walls seemed countless in number, endless in length; a village of hot-houses seemed to arise among them, and a whole parish to be at work within the inclosure. (p. 178)

The significant use of the word "inclosure" here, when coupled with Henry's earlier reference to the enclosure movement, might imply that the General has increased his estate by enclosure. And then the General professes himself a sympathizer with modern industry and a supporter of its development. He chose Staffordshire porcelain for his breakfast set because he "thought it right to encourage the manufacture of his country"; but this set, purchased two years ago, he calls "quite an old set," as "The manufacture was much improved since that time" (p. 175). Indeed, his passion for novelty is such that his life is crammed with products of modern industry; he travels in a fashionable chaise-and-four, fits up rooms with furniture of the latest fashion, and installs modern contrivances, such as a Rumford fireplace in the drawing-room and succession-houses in the kitchen garden. His neophilia extends even to food and drink; he drinks cocoa, and grows pineapples in the modern-equipped kitchen garden. He shows off all these things not only proudly but also in a coercive manner, extorting admiration and praise from Catherine for each of them, till she becomes "heartily weary of seeing and wondering" (p. 179). It is worth noting that here too the General now and again alleges he acts "for the good of others." About the rearing of fruits he pleads thus: "Though careless enough in most matters of eating, he loved good fruit—or if he did not, his friends and children did" (p. 178; emphasis added). When he shows Catherine round the kitchen and offices, he tries to impress her with his benevolence towards his servants. In the kitchen his "improving hand" has adopted "every modern invention to facilitate the labour of the cooks" (p. 183). As for the offices, he boasts:

<sup>24</sup> Spring, p. 65.

if he had a vanity, it was in the arrangement of his offices; and as he was convinced, that, to a mind like Miss Morland's, a view of the accommodations and comforts, by which the labours of her inferiors were softened, must always be gratifying, he should make no apology for leading her on. (p. 184)<sup>25</sup>

The General's real vanity lies, of course, in the things themselves—rare fruit, modern inventions, new devices and equipment—or the fact that he is their introducer; “the good of others” is little more than self-justification—and self-deception.

General Tilney's monomaniac attachment to novel commodities has often been associated with the consumer revolution of this age. Tony Tanner, for example, takes the General's “compulsive acquisitiveness” as “a symptom of the new consumer urge of the age and the crass material instinct for competitive emulation it spawned.”<sup>26</sup> Edward Copeland, on the other hand, puts emphasis on the General's snobbery rather than his acquisitiveness, seeing in it a sign of the modern consumer culture in which things are valued not for their own sake but for the prestige they confer on their possessors.<sup>27</sup> But whether acquisitive or snobbish, the General is regarded both by Tanner and Copeland as a type arising from the new consumer era—“a typical—and nasty—‘product’ of the exponential increase of consumer products which the Industrial Revolution was making available.”<sup>28</sup> Yet we must not forget that the General, an improving landowner, is among those who were themselves promoting industrial development—the landowning classes were leaders of the new industrial age. The General, therefore, is not a “product” but a “producer” of the age. According to Christopher Kent, the General is a typical example of the upper classes whose snobbery was taken advantage of by such entrepreneurs as Josiah Wedgwood—they were turned into a “claque,” praising and publicizing products of manufacturers.<sup>29</sup> But if they were a claque, they were a willing one. Jane Austen certainly recognized the leading position of the landed gentry in the new industrial society, and it is the way they exerted their influence that she tried to expose. They were spurred on by acquisitiveness and snobbery, yet they

25 Southam, in “*Sanditon: The Seventh Novel*,” sees in the General's “pious concern for the welfare of his servants” a mocking allusion to Count Rumford, the inventor of the Rumford fireplace, who “prided himself as a philanthropist-thinker” (p. 14).

26 Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 65.

27 Edward Copeland, *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 92–93.

28 Tanner, p. 65.

29 Christopher Kent, “‘Real Solemn History’ and Social History,” in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 98–99.

pleaded the benefits of industrial progress and unabashedly imposed their materialist principles upon the nation. In this attitude Jane Austen discerned tyranny, similar in essence to the other political tyrannies of this period. General Tilney's compelling materialism is an embodiment of this tyranny.

Let us here take a glance at the famous polemic passage in an earlier part of the book—the author's bold defence of the novel. In this passage Jane Austen complains of the low esteem in which the novel is generally held, and deplores especially the common practice among novelists themselves of deprecating the novel. As *Northanger Abbey* abounds in literary allusions, the passage has been commented on mainly from a literary point of view; Minako Enomoto, however, viewing the passage in a historical light, argues that Jane Austen's protest was directed in part to an influential group of moral reformers—the Evangelicals.<sup>30</sup> Taking advantage of the reactionary atmosphere of the 1790s, this group advocated the reformation of manners and morals on an extensive scale, and, thanks to their untiring zeal and highly organized activities, their campaigns achieved an enormous success. They were notoriously aggressive, furiously attacking whatever they considered bad and depraved, including novels. But there was some contradiction in the measures they took, for, while denouncing the novel as pernicious, they adopted it as a means of propagating their teachings. Hannah More's famous *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* (1809) is a typical example. Hence, Enomoto suggests, Jane Austen's harangue against novelists' disparaging of the novel. While it must have exasperated Jane Austen the novelist to see those who deprecate the novel unashamedly exploiting it, perhaps what offended her most was the presumptuousness of the Evangelicals who imposed their self-approved doctrines on the nation in the name of moral reform—a clear case of tyranny. Writing of the author's tone in the passage vindicating the novel, Jane Aiken Hodge concludes that the passage was added during the final revision of the novel in 1816.<sup>31</sup> If so, it would not be far-fetched to suppose that Jane Austen inserted the passage to make a subtle disparagement of dictatorial reformers.

Yet it was by no means her intention to attack or denounce a particular instance of tyranny; she alludes to concrete examples in order to demonstrate the variety, frequency, and perniciousness of tyranny. At the same

30 Minako Enomoto, "Ōsuten ni okeru shōsetsu-bengo no haikai" [The Background of Jane Austen's Vindication of the Novel] in her *Ōsuten no shōsetsu to sono shūhen* [The Novels of Jane Austen and Their Backgrounds] (Tokyo: Eihōsha, 1984), pp. 202-34.

31 Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Double Life of Jane Austen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), pp. 177-78.

time, by including images of real tyranny in her characterization of General Tilney, she hints that all forms of tyranny are analogous, however dissimilar they may appear in their outward manifestations. It is therefore beside the mark to read the novel as criticism of, say, the tyranny of patriarchy. Jane Austen regards tyranny primarily as a problem of human nature, rather than of systems or institutions; she knew that prescriptions against a single sort of tyranny were of little avail and even dangerous. In human society tyranny takes many forms; yet there are links between the various forms, since tyranny has its root in the soil of human nature.



Let us finally consider characters other than General Tilney in their relation to the theme of tyranny. *Northanger Abbey* has often been criticized as clumsily constructed, and the continuity of the story is broken as the scene changes from Bath to Northanger. The actions of characters in the earlier part of the book, however, sometimes anticipate, and sometimes supply a contrast to, the arbitrariness of General Tilney in the latter part. Isabella and John Thorpe stick at nothing to get their way, and are capable of unwarrantable coercion, as in the scene in which they, together with James Morland, press Catherine to join them in a drive to Clifton. In this episode these three—more or less prompted by selfish purposes—force Catherine to bend to their will in spite of her prior engagement. Although trivial, their coercion foreshadows the more serious “violence” of General Tilney. As for Isabella Thorpe, we can draw a parallel between her self-deception and the General’s. Isabella is certainly faithless, selfish, and acquisitive; but, shallow and thoughtless as well, she is in no sense a wily schemer like Lady Susan or Lucy Steele. Her repeated use of sentimental cant words such as “feeling” and “friendship” serves not so much to deceive Catherine as to deceive herself. These words are slogans adopted and flaunted to obliterate selfish purposes. Catherine, on the other hand, is conscientious, if naïve, scrupulously trying to do what is right. After repelling the unreasonable request of the Thorpes and her brother to take part in their party, she scrutinizes her motives thus:

Setting her own inclination apart, to have failed a second time in her engagement to Miss Tilney, to have retracted a promise voluntarily made only five minutes before, and on a false pretence too, must have been wrong. She had not been withstanding them on selfish principles alone, she had not consulted merely her own gratification ... no, she had attended to what was due to others, and to her own character in their opinion. (p. 101)

This scrupulous attitude is never seen in the General or Isabella, and Catherine's strict self-examination presents a striking contrast to their habitual self-deception—the cloaking of “selfish principles” with specious slogans.

Besides Catherine, there are several characters—those who are never domineering or obtrusive—who are contrasted with General Tilney. Catherine's mother, for example, when she found Catherine weary of learning music, “did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste, [and] allowed her to leave off” (p. 14). Similarly, as guardians, the Allens are far from dictatorial. Although Mr Allen has negative opinions about young men and women driving in open carriages, it is not until Catherine asks for his advice that he speaks his mind, and even then he discourages her from giving Isabella the same advice, saying “you had better not interfere” (p. 105). Mrs Allen's inability to advise is made fun of, but her husband's policy might be called judicious *laissez-faire*, the reverse of General Tilney's authoritarianism. Henry Tilney also tries to refrain from influencing Catherine unduly. He must see through Isabella's character at an early stage, yet he does not interfere with Catherine's friendship with her. Even when Isabella's flirtation with Captain Tilney becomes so glaring that the worried Catherine applies to Henry for advice, he refuses to give any, trying to make Catherine judge for herself. This attitude does not fundamentally change when he admonishes Catherine about her Gothic fantasies. As for her suspicions about the General's guilt, Catherine goes too far, and Henry tries to convince her of her excess there; but there is no commanding or authoritative tone in his expostulation—he reasons with her. In another scene he draws an analogy between dancing and marriage, and persistently tries to persuade Catherine of the validity of his view. Unlike the General's obtrusive harangue on the need for a profession (p. 176), however, this is hardly an imposition of opinions; rather he subtly probes Catherine's feeling about himself—his speech is “witty courtship,” as Howard S. Babb puts it.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, wit is another conspicuous feature of Henry Tilney. “There was an archness and pleasantry in his manner”—so the narrator comments when Catherine makes her first acquaintance with him (p. 25), and this humorous spirit seldom deserts him. Apart from his final “revolt” against his father, he is always cool, emotionally detached from and amused at what is going on around him. And when we consider that persons of General Tilney's type often lack this spirit, Henry's

32 Howard S. Babb, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), p. 109.

“archness and pleasantry” might be regarded as an oblique comment on tyranny.

In this novel Jane Austen takes up the problem of tyranny with serious intentions; yet there is no anger or quarrelsomeness in her manner of handling of it, as we see in the way in which she represents General Tilney, who is primarily an object of laughter. One feels that Jane Austen was constitutionally allergic to tyranny, but in this book she never openly attacks it or bitterly resents it. Such pugnacity and irascibility are in fact the basic constituents of tyranny, and the characteristics as well of the General, who casts Catherine out of the Abbey in a fit of unreasonable rage. Compared with him, Catherine is gentle in nature; she is a member of a family who are “far from being an irritable race” (p. 233). Yet even she is sometimes roused to anger. She harbours “virtuous indignation” against the General, who she suspects has been a cruel husband (p. 181). And later, in her own mild way, she expresses her indignation against the inconstant and mercenary Isabella and the flirtatious Captain Tilney; but Henry Tilney adroitly takes the edge off her indignation. Jane Austen knew that “virtuous indignation” was a dangerous thing. When one is driven to denounce tyranny bitterly, denunciation in turn can become tyranny, as the course of events in France in the 1790s, and the English reaction, well illustrate. Fully aware of this, Jane Austen refrained from outright hostile criticism of tyranny and, with characteristic humour, portrayed General Tilney as an object of laughter.