



Parents Against Children: General Tilney as Gothic Monster

JOHN A. DUSSINGER

John A. Dussinger is a Professor in the English department of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His writings on eighteenth-century literature include *The Discourse of the Mind* (1974). Recent work includes *In the Pride of the Moment: Encounters in Jane Austen's World* (1990).

ALTHOUGH BY NOW a critical commonplace that Jane Austen's novels are off-limits to the rakes who prey upon unsuspecting, helpless women in eighteenth-century fiction, nevertheless, because of her similar stress on the landed classes that equated marriage (with or without love) to mainly an enhancement of the family estate, it is probably not surprising that there is at least a residue of sexual violence, if only imagined, toward the woman, in her narratives. According to the plot, of course, Catherine Morland was dreadfully wrong about suspecting General Tilney of having murdered his wife after a period of incarceration and physical abuse at Northanger Abbey; and Henry's sudden appearance and lecture on her overindulgence in Gothic fantasy are seemingly therapeutic. Yet his sharp rebuke at the end of chapter 9 (volume 2) was hardly necessary: just before his arrival we are told that Catherine "was sick of exploring, and desired but to be safe in her own room, with her own heart only privy to its folly" (194). As usual, Henry is more concerned with having the upper hand with Catherine than with admitting his father's tyrannical hold over his children's lives; and it is a testimony to her artistic economy, I believe, that Austen chose not to render the turbulent scene of his rebellion before at last proposing marriage to Catherine at Fullerton.

In the controversial 1986 BBC television film of this novel, writ-

ten by Maggie Wadey and directed by Giles Foster, we are provided with a fine scene when Henry (Peter Firth) confronts his father (Robert Hardy), who is in some ways even more culpable than Austen's original character. He is now guilty of gambling away his money to the detriment of his heirs as well as of being a drunk.¹ Yet, despite his vivid image as predator while releasing his falcon, General Tilney is noticeably affectionate in handling this bird, while confessing to his son that his bark is worse than his bite, as the scene fades out, leaving us with at least a hope of eventual reconciliation with his children. Such optimism does not appear justified in Austen's novel.

But what is perhaps the most bold departure from the novel is this film's rendering of Catherine's Gothic fantasies about General Tilney's perverse intentions toward her. What cheap sensationalism, shades of Ken Russell, I thought, upon first viewing this film. But on further reflection, I believe that Giles Foster does have a point in reminding us that Austen's character derives from a stereotype of the patriarchal tyrants in the Gothic romances that she and her family knew firsthand.

Thanks to Judith Wilt's invaluable study, *Ghosts of the Gothic*, it should be clear by now that the old notion that Austen was exploding Radcliffe's romances in *Northanger Abbey* in favor of common sense is too superficial at best; and the scene in the Giles Foster film where Catherine tosses that precious leather-bound copy of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* into the fire, after Henry's scolding her for imagining his father to be a murderer, ignores the fact that Henry himself is explicitly (and Austen, implicitly!) an avid reader of Radcliffe.² Moreover, in her portrayal of General Tilney, Austen parodies and imitates not only Radcliffe's villain Montoni in *Udolpho* but more generally the parent-child relationship in the Gothic romance, beginning with the pioneering work in that genre—Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). When Austen was probably sketching this parodic novel as *Susan* in 1797, a new octavo edition of Walpole's classic was published with plates by the London bookseller E. Jeffery.

This story opens with these words:

Manfred, Prince of Otranto, had one son and one daughter: the latter, a most beautiful virgin, aged eighteen, was called Matilda. Conrad, the son, was three years younger, a homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition;

yet he was the darling of his father, who never showed any symptoms of affection to Matilda (27).

We immediately have the ill-fated wedding of Manfred's son, who is crushed to death by a giant helmet. Without giving any further thought to his dead child, Manfred proposes marriage to Isabella, Conrad's bride, saying, "Instead of a sickly boy, you shall have a husband in the prime of his age, who will know how to value your beauties, and who may expect a numerous offspring'" (33). Despite the inconvenience of being already married to the now sterile but dotting wife, Hippolyta, Manfred intends to divorce her on the spot and carry out sexual union with Isabella, that very night if possible. Horrified, Isabella flees from the castle through subterranean passageways to seek sanctuary in the nearby St. Nicolas Church. A friar, Father Jerome, intervenes to warn Manfred "not to pursue thine incestuous design on thy contracted daughter'" (54). Father Jerome, we discover, is actually the Count of Falconara, whose long lost son, Theodore, is the true heir of Otranto. Manfred's grandfather had usurped the castle after poisoning its owner, Alphonse the Good. And since Walpole tells us that the sins of the fathers are passed down to the third or fourth generation, it is now time for Manfred to pay the price for his family's crime. In spite of his ridiculously compulsive behavior in trying to obtain another son, Manfred, we are told, "was not one of those savage tyrants, who wanton in cruelty unprovoked" (40). Later, when Manfred proposes a double marriage to avert the doom to Otranto, Hippolyta not only agrees to a divorce, but joins Manfred in trying to force Matilda into marrying Isabella's father, Frederic, who is easily persuaded to be her husband (91). Thus, we now find two fathers who lust after each other's daughters while scheming to gain power through the estate.

With such Oedipal Gothic fathers hovering in the background, it is understandable why Catherine Morland is prepared to fear the worst about General Tilney. Previous commentators overlook, or at least underestimate, the prurient interest that General Tilney shows toward Catherine and especially her own arousal (she blushes [80] upon seeing him gaze at her).³ In contrast, Henry, an Anglican minister by profession, appropriately never betrays a tincture of libido; instead, it is his wit and penetration of her mind that seem to attract her. Catherine, as naïf, has not a clue until the very end why the

General pays such special attention to her, but seems to welcome it if only for self-esteem.

Despite the much lower mimetic world of the novel, where the “anxieties of common life” prevail, Manfred’s ghost lurks throughout General Tilney’s role in this story. Both fathers are shown to be quite capable of replacing their sons as sexual partners. Manfred’s boast to Isabella of being a much better lover than his “puny” son would have been is not very reassuring to the poor girl, even if she had never loved Conrad. Like Father Jerome, Isabella equates marrying a contracted father-in-law to incest and thus finds Manfred’s proposal repulsive. Though, of course, General Tilney never breathes a word of desire for Catherine, nevertheless, at her first sight of him she is impressed by his physical endowments:

He was a very handsome man, of a commanding aspect, past the bloom, but not past the vigour of life; and with his eye still directed towards her, she saw him presently address Mr. Tilney in a familiar whisper. (80)

Past the bloom, but not past the vigour of life: in other words, General Tilney is still fit to be sexually active!

Upon learning that he is Henry’s father, Catherine is all the more stimulated: “With real interest and strong admiration did her eye now follow the General, as he moved through the crowd, and ‘How handsome a family they are!’ was her secret remark” (80). Later, at the theater while conversing with Henry, she finds herself being scrutinized at a distance by the General and John Thorpe, and apparently being discussed by them. Afterwards Thorpe makes a significant comparison of father to son: “[The General] is a fine old fellow, upon my soul!—stout, active,—looks as young as his son” (95). For once Thorpe probably gets it right and concurs with Catherine’s own observation that this man was not past the vigor of life. His further report arouses Catherine: “‘the General thinks you the finest girl in Bath’... ‘And what do you think I said?’ (lowering his voice) ‘Well done, General, said I, I am quite of your mind’” (96). Catherine “was much less gratified by his admiration than by General Tilney’s,” indeed, because she is in love with Henry and wants to please her would-be father-in-law.

Yet Thorpe’s leering remark seems to imply a similar lasciviousness in the General’s attitude toward her. After rushing to the

Tilneys' to explain that Thorpe had tried to cancel her rendezvous with them, and in a state of breathlessness, she meets the General for the first time; he, in turn, finds her agitation enticing:

The general attended her himself to the street-door, saying every thing gallant as they went down stairs, admiring the elasticity of her walk, which corresponded exactly with the spirit of her dancing, and making her one of the most graceful bows she had ever beheld, when they parted. (103)

The free indirect discourse here implies that the General has actually remarked that Catherine is as lively a walker as she is a dancer. If, as a widower, the General may feel more at liberty in stepping in as an eligible beau here, it is also noteworthy that Henry seems scarcely present at all. Just as the hero in Gothic romances is usually passive in contrast to the villain, according to Judith Wilt, so at least whenever his father is around, Henry's role is relatively diminished.⁴ It is the General, for instance, who has the power of inviting Catherine to Northanger; and it is he who decides to allow her to ride alone with Henry in his curricule on the way. No matter how far removed from the crazed Manfred, the General reveals a comparable sexual prowess of the Gothic father in competition with the son for the heroine.

This motif of the lascivious father-in-law is much more complexly drawn in *Mansfield Park*, where Sir Thomas Bertram seems to take a stronger interest in Fanny Price's physical appearance than either of his sons ever do:

Fanny knew not how to feel, nor where to look. She was quite oppressed. He had never been so kind, so very kind to her in his life. His manner seemed changed; his voice was quick from the agitation of joy, and all that had been awful in his dignity seemed lost in tenderness. He led her nearer the light and looked at her again—inquired particularly after her health, and then correcting himself, observed, that he need not inquire, for her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point. A fine blush having succeeded the previous paleness of her face, he was justified in his belief of her equal improvement in health and beauty. (178)

The repeated use of the word "kind" in this passage bears comparison to Pamela's description of Mr. B.'s ambivalent behavior towards her at the beginning of Samuel Richardson's novel. Her par-

ents immediately warn her: “Oh! That frightful word, that he would be kind to you, if you would do as you should do; these things make us very fearful for your virtue.” And again quoting her words, they ask: “But then, *why should he smile so kindly upon you?*” (45-46). The problem, of course, is that as a young and marriageable master, Mr. B.’s particular interest in his servant, really his ward as well, is suspicious. By contrast, Sir Thomas’s attention here seems harmless enough, and Fanny has nothing to fear but regret: “his kindness altogether was such as made her reproach herself for loving him so little, and thinking his return a misfortune” (178).

Yet as if Austen wanted to emphasize that Sir Thomas’s kindness toward Fanny was not simply from charitable motives, Edmund subsequently testifies to his father’s awareness of her sexual attractiveness:

“Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny—and that is the long and short of the matter. Anybody but myself would have made something more of it, and any body but you would resent that you had not been thought very pretty before....Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained so much countenance!—and your figure—Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle. If you cannot bear an uncle’s admiration what is to become of you? You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.—You must try not to mind growing up into a pretty woman.” (197-98)

It is but an uncle! In the Gothic dream-world, we have seen, the fear of incest may have good cause! It is a strange speech, perhaps something rather to be expected from a mother or a sister than from a first cousin who is eventually to marry her. At his mentioning her “figure,” Edmund leaves no doubt that his father now sees her potential as a sexual partner. Again, just as we have seen how Henry needed his father to gaze at the heroine with the right amount of male libido, so another clergyman-son defers to his father’s presumably unquestionable authority on such matters as judging female livestock for the marriage market.

At this stage, nevertheless, Fanny’s lack of property remains a serious obstacle to her becoming a desirable marriage partner, and Henry Crawford’s proposal later stimulates Sir Thomas into becoming

a reincarnation of Montoni in pressuring this hapless girl into a union with a more subtle version of Count Morano. In a grotesque twist of irony, despite Fanny's secret devotion to him all the time that he is infatuated with Mary Crawford, Edmund seems somehow devoid of any sexual desire for his cousin and instead apes his father in urging her to accept Henry Crawford's proposal:

“let him succeed at last, Fanny, let him succeed at last.

You have proved yourself upright and disinterested, prove yourself grateful and tender-hearted; and then you will be the perfect model of a woman, which I have always believed you born for.” (347)

Although seemingly remote from the world of Walpole or Radcliffe, the situation here is demonically Gothic, though in the daylight world: again the patriarchal tyrant tries to force the heroine into a marriage without love for the sake of enhancing the estate. But more alarming is his feckless son's role here as pander. Yet Sir Thomas is finally no Manfred or Montoni; and he is far more sympathetic than General Tilney. If not very successful in communicating with his children, Sir Thomas at least has the consideration to inquire into his daughter Maria's feelings toward Mr. Rushworth before consenting to their marriage. Then, after the trauma of both his own daughters' moral ruin, he comes to value Fanny's integrity and prudence as a compensating filial surrogate, welcoming her into his family with open arms along with his now disabused younger son.

If General Tilney lacks Manfred's cruelty toward his daughter, he is always a disturbing presence and represses Eleanor in every scene. General Tilney's interrupting Eleanor's tour with Catherine when they had approached her mother's room, calling her “hastily, and, as Catherine thought, rather angrily back” (185), does depend on the heroine's possibly mistaken interpretation of his tone as well as intentions. But his moodiness later that day seems all the more sinister:

when she saw him in the evening, while she worked with her friend, slowly pacing the drawing-room for an hour together in silent thoughtfulness with downcast eyes and contracted brow, she felt secure from all possibility of wronging him. It was the air and attitude of a Montoni!—What could more plainly speak the gloomy workings of a mind not wholly dead to every sense of humanity, in its

fearful review of past scenes of guilt? Unhappy man!—and the anxiousness of her spirits directed her eyes towards his figure so repeatedly, as to catch Miss Tilney’s notice. “My father,” she whispered, “often walks about the room in this way; it is nothing unusual.” (187)

Left unexplained, of course, is why General Tilney habitually paces the floor in this manner. What is bothering him? If not for reasons that Catherine imagines, what else might they be? If we are to assume that the story takes place at about the time of its composition in 1797-98, then perhaps we should also assume that the General is actually worried about how his country was doing in its war against France, at a time when Napoleon was emerging as the seemingly invincible military genius of the day. No wonder, then, when everyone else is about to go to bed, General Tilney does not retire:

“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.” (187)

Unconvinced that he is delaying sleep to read these “stupid pamphlets,” Catherine instead suspects that he wants to sneak off to the most Gothic part of the abbey “which yet bore the traces of monastic division” and visit his confined wife: “Down that stair-case she had perhaps been conveyed in a state of well-prepared insensibility!” (188).

Wholly unbeknownst to Catherine, the General could well have been reading such “stupid pamphlets” as any number of those addressed to the threat of invasion from France. A search through the *Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue Database* (The British Library Board 1992) indicates more than five thousand titles published for the year 1797, by far the majority concerning religious and moral issues. Instead of such material, it is more likely that the General would be reading pamphlets about the military and financial problems arising from England’s war with France. Not including the many publications by the army and navy on the war at this time, there were well over a dozen pamphlets published in 1797 that General Tilney might have been spoiling his eyesight over during the night. Some examples are Captain James Burney’s *Plan of Defence Against Invasion*; Colonel

Alexander Dirom's *Plans for the Defence of Great Britain and Ireland*; and Thomas Erskine's *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the Present War with France*. Besides the military threat of the invasion itself, the pamphleteers were also quite feverish about the financial threat to Britain during this stage of the war with France. Some other titles for General Tilney's late-night reading might include the following: William Morgan's *An Appeal to the People of Great Britain, on the Present Alarming State of the Public Finances, and of Public Credit*; William Pitt's Speech, on the 12th of February, 1796, *Relative to the Relief and Maintenance of the Poor, the Encouragement of Industry, and the Diminution of the Poor-rates*; and John Williamson's *A Treatise on Military Finance*.⁵

But perhaps for General Tilney the most disturbing pamphlet of all to come out in 1797 was one from Edinburgh: [James Housden's] *Sir, A Tax on Clocks and Watches Forming a Part of this Year's Supply being announced, a Meeting of the Trade was held here this Day*. Given the General's penchant for holding his children to the very minute of his clock in getting them to the dinner table, we can well imagine his concern over this tax proposal from north of the Tweed. Who knows, maybe that was the main thing on his mind while he paced about the room in front of Catherine and Eleanor that evening!

Austen's endings, as one of her recent biographers, John Halperin, complained, are generally "bungled" and fragmentary (107). But deliberately so, I would argue, to remind her readers that the conventions of the novel as genre are just that—neat forms of inviting the reader's suspension of disbelief. Her sketchy conclusion to *Northanger Abbey* is of a piece with her parodic instincts. If you believe her proffered version, she may be saying, then you have not done your homework with the Gothic romance, which reveals the demonic netherworld underlying economic arrangements that pass for rationality.

With Manfred as a role model of the Gothic father, Catherine had good reason to suspect General Tilney's capacity for doing away with his wife and maybe posing a threat to herself as well during her relatively one-sided interest in his son. It is never allowed into Austen's text, but who is to blame Catherine if at least the thought passed her mind in her nightly dreams that General Tilney was brooding over the fact that his rather effete son should possess her rather than he himself! Farfetched? Yes, perhaps, but only if we ignore the pervasive influence of the Gothic on the story that Austen is writ-

ing not only to parody but also to imitate fictional life. Despite the sensationalism of the BBC film, it does remind us, without apparently intending to do so, to see how Catherine's Gothic fantasies merged with realistic anxieties, rather than to treat them as mutually exclusive ways of perceiving her world.

NOTES

1. For a very brief but useful comparison of this film to Austen's original, see Marilyn Roberts, "Catherine Morland: Gothic Heroine After All?" *Topic: A Journal of the Liberal Arts* 48 (1997): 22-30.
2. Wilt argues persuasively that far from rejecting Radcliffe's romances, Austen is adapting her narrative style to the "anxieties of modern life." See chapter 3, 121-72, especially 126-29.
3. Wilt does mention the General's "mysterious 'incessant attentions' to Catherine," but does not comment on the similarity of this behavior to Manfred's sexual aggression against Isabella (145). Marilyn Roberts, to be sure, recognizes the sexual import of the General's "admiration of [Catherine]," yet focuses on "Catherine's neurosis" rather than on her future father-in-law's almost perverse attraction to her (25).
4. Wilt is commenting on the role of Theodore in *Otranto*, however, not on that of Henry, whom she compares implausibly to Montoni (27).
5. Austen's favorite brother, Henry, was a popular officer in the Oxford Militia and during his seven years of service may well have referred to some "stupid pamphlets" on the course of the war. See Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Viking, 1997) 81.

WORKS CITED

- AUSTEN, JANE. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933-69.
- HALPERIN, JOHN. *The Life of Jane Austen*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1984.
- RICHARDSON, SAMUEL. *Pamela, Or, Virtue Rewarded*. Ed. Peter Sabor. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980.
- WALPOLE, HORACE. *The Castle of Otranto*. Ed. E. F. Bleiler. New York: Dover, 1966.
- WILT, JUDITH. *Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence*. Princeton: PUP, 1980.