



The French Bread at Northanger

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WHEN CATHERINE MORLAND is moping over Henry Tilney after her sudden return home, her unromantic mother, trying to account for her loss of spirits, thinks she must be missing the luxuries of life in the Abbey. “I hope, my Catherine, you are not getting out of humor with home because it is not so grand as Northanger. That would be turning your visit into an evil indeed. Wherever you are you should always be contented, but especially at home, because there you must spend the most of your time. I did not quite like, at breakfast, to hear you talk so much about the French bread at Northanger.”

To which Catherine dully replies, “I am sure I do not care about the bread. It is all the same to me what I eat” (241).

Easily overlooked in the gathering pace of the story—only a paragraph later Henry appears, and within another page proposes—this short exchange is essential to many of the themes of the novel. It is one of the supreme examples of the economy of Jane Austen’s art, in which a handful of ordinary-seeming sentences contrive to do an extraordinary amount of work. I would like to look in detail at the work accomplished in this passage, before moving on to examine the wider use of food in *Northanger Abbey*.

First, on the level of character. There is not much opportunity

in the novel for Mrs. Morland's character to be portrayed, but here an added depth is given to it. In the early chapters she is endowed more with comic function than individuality; here we glimpse a fully realized woman, and mother—the only competent mother of a heroine in the six novels, in fact. No wonder she has to be kept out of the way during the whole of Catherine's adventures. For while we are supposed to smile at Mrs. Morland's imperceptivity and lack of imagination, consider how different it is from the wrapped-up-in-herself imperceptivity of Mrs. Allen, who has stood in place of a mother to Catherine through much of the novel, and dismally failed her. Mrs. Morland is far from negligent, her priority as a mother being concern for the moral training of her daughter. Nor is she inactive in the cause, though she has plenty of other calls on her time, for seeing that her words have had little effect; to reinforce them she seizes the moment and leaves the room to look for a clever essay she remembers reading. Most of all we are invited to share Mrs. Morland's moral values, even to take a lesson from them along with Catherine; her little homily about being contented wherever you are is the philosophy Jane Austen herself tried to live by, witness her efforts to reconcile herself to the move to Bath, and contentedness is a quality she commends in a whole range of female characters, from Mrs. Collins to Mrs. Smith. (Male characters can usually *do* something about it if they are dissatisfied with their lot—women are more often at the mercy of circumstance.)

What about Catherine's character—does this exchange add anything to our understanding of it? After all, by this stage of the novel we know her pretty completely. In fact, I think it does. Jane Austen takes this opportunity, however late in the day, to be explicit about a trait that all her heroines share, that is, indifference to what they eat. To complain or make a fuss about food is understandably morally reprehensible in Jane Austen's world. But equally, to express enjoyment of food, to anticipate or recollect a meal with pleasure, to confess to any preferences are activities that immediately condemn the person who indulges in them as greedy, trivial-minded, or vulgar. With the exception of Emma in her role as Lady Bountiful, none of the heroines talks about food; the subject, like fashion, is beneath them. The food arrives—the narratives include plenty of mealtimes—and they presumably eat it, to keep healthy and conform to society—unless of

course they are a Marianne Dashwood or a Jane Fairfax under extraordinary emotional stress, when the rejection of food takes on a special meaning. But more than simply showing us this delicate omission in her heroines' thought processes and conversation, Jane Austen takes care to point it out, or point it up, in every novel.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor is quite Marianne's equal in this respect. On the three-day journey from Devonshire to London, Mrs. Jennings is "disturbed that she could not make them choose their own dinners at the inn, nor extort a confession of their preferring salmon to cod, or boiled fowls to veal cutlets" (160). Mrs. Jennings is behaving properly and kindly in the office of hostess, and it does seem rather rude of the sisters not to show more appreciation and interest; but this kind of high-minded indifference carries such a freight of authorial approval that their failure in politeness is overlooked. On a later occasion Elinor behaves better, when she consents to drink the glass of Constantia wine that Mrs. Jennings brings to cure the broken heart of Marianne. That Elinor, in drinking the wine herself rather than disturb her sleeping sister or hurt the feelings of Mrs. Jennings, is acting from unselfish consideration rather than for her own gratification is unobtrusively but unmistakably signaled by her swallowing only "the chief of it" (198). She mustn't be allowed to enjoy it enough to drain every drop!

We are assured that Fanny Price is a cut above the vulgarity of her nearest relations when, as a ten-year-old, she fails to be consoled for the separation from them by a gooseberry tart; this is promising for a heroine; and later, back at Portsmouth, we are expressly told that she was "nice," not from being brought up in a school of luxury and epicurism like Henry Crawford, but from "natural delicacy" (407). Emma Woodhouse has, by force of circumstance, many dealings with food, but not one that concerns the gratification of her own appetite. Anne Elliot by contrast has no dealings with food whatsoever, in a novel that has the fewest mentions of the subject, reflecting the lack of nourishment, for the soul or the emotions, of the inhospitable world she inhabits; her abstemiousness is shown only in the evidence of her "slender form."

Quite early in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet's indifference to what she eats is conveyed when she replies to an inquiry from Mr. Hurst that she prefers a plain dish to a ragout. This calls forth scorn in

Mr. Hurst, who is thereby censured not only for a taste in rich food but for talking about food at all—it is his only conversation with Elizabeth. Despite an abundance of energy and *joie de vivre* that must flow from health of body and mind, Elizabeth never betrays the slightest enjoyment of food. We might not expect her to join Mr. Collins in enumerating all the dishes at supper on the way back from Mrs. Philips's, for that certainly would be vulgar and low, but neither will she take a daughterly interest in her mother's menu-making, escaping from such conversations whenever she can, even when it is a question of what might please Darcy. In her attitude to food Elizabeth is perhaps better qualified to be a heroine than to be the mistress of a household.

So Catherine's "It is all the same to me what I eat" is, despite its tone almost of sulkiness, certainly of languor, heroic. It bears out what we have observed in her before, that she has been awed, but not gratified, by the magnificent table kept by General Tilney at Northanger. Catherine has a natural, healthy appetite—she feels hungry after a ball in Bath, and is not comfortable until she has appeased that hunger; but her tastes are simple. Her attitude to food is perfectly balanced, and she has achieved this, moreover, without giving the subject a moment's thought. A true heroine.

But, I would suggest, beyond the illustration of character, the enactment of approved moral values, there is a special significance in the foodstuff chosen by Jane Austen to figure in this seemingly casual exchange between Catherine and her mother. Why, of all the luxuries the General's table undoubtedly afforded, pick on French bread?

The answer I think is that for Jane Austen anything French was an anathema, and French food especially so. That ragout of Mr. Hurst: the very word seems to condemn him. In this Jane Austen was both indulging a personal feeling and picking up on a public debate that had been current all through the eighteenth century. On a personal level, she does, sadly perhaps, appear to have loathed everything French, for example, writing of a friend, "He is come back from France, thinking of the French as one could wish, disappointed in everything" (8 September 1816). If her exaggerated hatred of France had become something of a byword in her family—that this was not a general Austen characteristic is suggested by the fact that her brothers James, Edward, and Henry all traveled for pleasure on the

Continent—then perhaps the ragout was introduced into *Pride and Prejudice* partly as a joke against herself that the family would enjoy. There are many such in-jokes in the *Juvenilia* and a few, in all probability, that have been left to stand in the novels composed at Steventon (Mr. Morland's name being Richard, for example?).

But the word “ragout” would certainly have triggered off associations in her readership generally. It was mentioned in an anonymous “Satyr against the French” in 1691, and by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in 1717 (Burton 197). Distrust of French food was widespread. Robert Campbell, in *The London Tradesman* of 1747, railed against “Meats and Drinks dressed after the French fashion” disguising their “native properties.” And Parson Woodforde complained in his diary of a meal eaten out in 1783 that most of the dishes were “spoiled by being so frenchified in dressing” (18 August 1783). The complaint against French food in all cases seems to be that it is—like the English perception of the French character—sophisticated, not what it seems, not to be trusted.

In the same article Robert Campbell recalled “the days of good Queen Elizabeth, when mighty Roast Beef was the Englishman's Food, our Cookery was plain and simple”; and as late as 1807 Robert Southey was writing of “the roast beef of Old England” being connected with “national honor” (89). English cooking and English character were evidently connected in the public consciousness, and it is this, in my opinion, that accounts for the otherwise superfluous detail of what Willoughby, towards the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, consumed in a Marlborough inn on his hasty journey to see Marianne before she was to die. We know that this consisted of cold beef and a pint of porter, because he tells Elinor so in order to refute her imputation that he has had too much to drink. But the menu does more than that; as almost invariably with Jane Austen, even such a mundane detail has a moral dimension. Willoughby's choice of good, plain, honest, manly, English fare is, on however subliminal a level, a mark in his favor. He is behaving honorably and with feeling at last.

Remarkably, despite the impression we come away with from *Northanger Abbey* of tables groaning with expensive and luxurious food, the French bread referred to in retrospect is one of only two foodstuffs actually particularized (the other is pineapple, another commodity alien to English shores). French bread is the ultimate condemnation of

General Tilney's attitude to food, and hence his character. (He also drinks cocoa, than which nothing might seem more innocuous and homely; but when Jane Austen was writing, chocolate too was, of course, an expensive and prestigious import. The only time we hear of the Austens themselves drinking chocolate is when they visited Stoneleigh Abbey in 1806, where it was one of the many breakfast dishes enumerated by Mrs. Austen in a letter to her daughter-in-law Mary.)

In the characterization of General Tilney, Jane Austen shows us greed and epicurism not just as a personal failing or even an endearing weakness but as a serious moral flaw through its effects on other people. There are several greedy *youngish* men in Jane Austen—one thinks of Mr. Hurst, Mr. Collins, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Elton, Arthur Parker of course—and even, potentially, Henry Crawford; Mary warns her brother against becoming like his uncle the Admiral and learning to sit over his dinner “as if it were the best blessing of life” (295-96). The heroines are well advised to steer clear of such potential marriage partners because of what they will become. For the comfort and complacency of married life and middle age are likely to exacerbate any tendency to self-indulgence with regard to eating in the male. This is all the more reprehensible because a married man has the happiness of other people in his keeping. If the master of the house is irritable or demanding about his daily meals, it is his wife and children who will suffer. A harmless if unattractive foible in youth thus becomes a serious defect in a husband who cares more for the gratification of his appetite than for the peace and harmony of his home.

In the characters of General Tilney and of Doctor Grant in *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen gives sustained critical attention to two men who, through love of eating, render the atmosphere in their homes unpleasant, thereby violating her principal rule of behavior, that it is the duty of every individual to guard from unnecessary suffering those with whom he or she lives and associates. Their characters are very different—Dr. Grant is indolent while General Tilney is anything but—yet the characterization of each is built around their faulty attitude to the demands and pleasures of the table. The amount of rich food that disappears down the throats of the Doctor and the General is in direct analogy to the amount of the world's goods and esteem that they expect and enjoy as their right. And it is in forcing others to

dance attendance on their eating that they delight in exercising their power.

General Tilney has children and Dr. Grant has a wife—and both have house guests—to be made uncomfortable by their lack of self-control. Unlike Mr. Hurst and the others, both are intelligent, mature men who ought to be capable of discerning that food is too trivial a matter to be worthy of their time and attention. Equipped with the learning and leisure for serious reflection, they ought to have acquired sufficient knowledge of themselves and their duty to get their feelings under better government. They are men of authority in their own homes, and some importance, even example, in their neighborhoods, which should further act as a break on their behavior—to say nothing of accountability to God. That all these considerations weigh so little with them in comparison with the fleeting pleasures of the table lays them open to the severest censure.

Greed might be a more tolerable failing if the indulgence of it made its possessors cheerful and contented, like Mrs. Jennings, who is fat and at ease with herself; she is not ashamed to recall her visit to Delaford with the words: “Lord! How Charlotte and I did stuff the only time we were there!” (197). But with the exception of Arthur Parker in *Sanditon*, who does relish his food, obsession with good eating seems to have the reverse effect on Jane Austen’s male characters, making them irritable, hypercritical, and morose. General Tilney does not straightforwardly enjoy food, he has to make a perpetual fuss about it. Punctuality, formality, abundance, show, and the best of everything are required at each and every one of his meals, whether at home or away, and however inappropriate or unnecessary. His obsession with eating takes a dual path: the gratification of his own palate; and the acknowledgment, by other people, of the superiority of his table, taste, and means.

When the Tilneys and Catherine Morland stop at Petty France on their way from Bath to Northanger, they have to “eat without being hungry” (it is only two hours since they had an ample breakfast). The meal, including loitering about waiting for it to be cooked, wastes two hours. Instead of being content, like the Bennet sisters at the George, with “such cold meat as an inn larder usually affords,” or like Willoughby at Marlborough hastily swallowing some cold beef and porter so that the journey can be quickly resumed, General Tilney

must order a meal to be specially prepared to his requirements. This is done without any deference to the wishes of the rest of the party, for he never consults his children's wishes and makes only nominal obeisance to Catherine's. The interval at Petty France is tedious and uncomfortable to the three young people, but even to the General himself it does not appear to bring any pleasure. "His discontent at whatever the inn afforded, and his angry impatience at the waiters, made Catherine grow every moment more in awe of him, and appeared to lengthen the two hours into four" (156).

Though he has already eaten well twice that day, on the first evening at Northanger his excessive concern with punctuality leads him into an unforgivable breach of manners. As Catherine and Eleanor descend from dressing, "General Tilney was pacing the drawing-room, his watch in his hand, and having, on the very instant of their entering, pulled the bell with violence, ordered 'Dinner to be on table *directly*'" (165). Strict rules about punctuality at meals might proceed from greed or from tyranny; in General Tilney, Jane Austen shows how closely connected the two defects are, or can be, in a man. Avid for the consumption of food, he also seeks to consume and destroy the autonomy of all who come under his sway. He is so used to exercising complete power over his children, his servants, tradespeople, and presumably once his regiment that in his anger he forgets what is due to a guest. That he later is said to have recovered his politeness shows that he is fully aware of how he *ought* to behave.

The General is frequently guilty of what Darcy would call "the indirect boast" in his often-expressed and quite ludicrous fears that his table has nothing to tempt Catherine's appetite. Though ostensibly and ostentatiously desirous of her comfort, he greatly diminishes it by his excessive attentions and the bullying way he extracts praise from her.

In what he says about eating, and all the paraphernalia that goes with that activity, he is untruthful and insincere. He professes to be "careless" about his surroundings when he dines, though the dining-parlor at Northanger is enormous and "fitted up in a style of luxury and expense," and to be "without vanity of that kind" in the choice of china, though the "elegance" of his is sufficient to force itself on Catherine's notice (175). Having taken Catherine on a tour of "a village of hothouses" and "a whole parish at work" in the kitchen gardens, "he then modestly owned that, 'without any ambition of that sort

himself—without any solicitude about it—he did believe them to be unrivalled in the kingdom. If he had a hobby-horse, it was that. He loved a garden. Though careless enough in most matters of eating, he loved good fruit—or if he did not, his friends and children did” (178). This last phrase is quite wonderfully hypocritical! How much of what he says does the General himself believe?

The money and labor that are expended at Northanger to produce dinner for three or four people each day are out of all proportion. Having marveled at the hothouses and kitchen gardens, and the number of outdoor servants, Catherine is taken into the kitchens:

The General’s improving hand had not loitered here: every modern invention to facilitate the labor of the cooks, had been adopted within this, their spacious theatre. . . . The purposes for which a few shapeless pantries and a comfortless scullery were deemed sufficient at Fullerton were here carried on in appropriate divisions, commodious and roomy. The number of servants continually appearing, did not strike her less than the number of their offices. (183)

The General’s claim that the purpose of his improvements has been to soften the labors of his servants is as little to be believed as his assertion that the hothouse fruit is grown for his friends’ and children’s benefit. The only other hint of hospitality towards “friends” that we hear of is the general’s boast of sending half a buck—that is, venison—every year to certain neighbors. This is a gift made to confer obligation and send an unmistakable message of social superiority. Prior to the eighteenth century, the keeping of deer implied that the owner had been granted the right to “empark” land for that purpose by his sovereign. This was the significance of “Park” in a place name, such as Godmersham Park or Mansfield Park. Northanger, of course, is not a Park; it’s something even more venerable—at least in Catherine’s eyes—but only those very rich in land could flaunt that most desirable of any food commodity in the world of Jane Austen, venison.

As for the General’s children, the extent to which his eating dominates them is illustrated by the planned excursion to Henry’s parsonage at Woodston. General Tilney expressly says to his son, “You are not to put yourself at all out of your way. Whatever you may happen to have in the house will be enough. I think I can answer for the

young ladies making allowance for a bachelor's table'" (210). When, therefore, Henry sets off to Woodston two days earlier than he would otherwise have gone, Catherine asks him why.

"Why!—How can you ask the question?—Because no time is to be lost in frightening my old housekeeper out of her wits—because I must go and prepare a dinner for you to be sure."

"Oh! not seriously!"

"Aye, and sadly too—for I had much rather stay."

"But how can you think of such a thing, after what the General said? When he so particularly desired you not to give yourself any trouble, because anything would do."

Henry only smiled. "I am sure it is quite unnecessary on your sister's account and mine. You must know it to be so; and the General made such a point of your providing nothing extraordinary:—besides, if he had not said half so much as he did, he has always such an excellent dinner at home, that sitting down to a middling one for one day could not signify."

"I wish I could reason like you, for his sake and my own. Good bye." (211)

Catherine is forced to accept that Henry understands his father best. When they do sit down to dinner at Woodston, after a day in which the General has been gratified by the apparent success of his schemes for a match between the two young people, Catherine "could not but observe that the abundance of the dinner did not seem to create the smallest astonishment in the General; nay, that he was even looking at the side-table for cold meat which was not there." His son and daughter's observations were of a different kind. They had seldom seen him eat so heartily at any table but his own; and never before known him so little disconcerted by the melted butter's being "oiled" (215).

Leaving Catherine thus all happiness at Woodston, it is perhaps appropriate to end by offering one further observation on the very subtle symbolism of food in Jane Austen's art: that is, her use of fruit and fruit trees to symbolize conjugal happiness and increase. It can hardly be mere coincidence that so many of the homes to which the young women in Jane Austen will be taken on marriage are fruitful

places. Donwell Abbey is famed for its strawberry beds. Abbey Mill farm has its spreading orchards and also its path between espaliered apple trees to the front door, the door through which Robert Martin will conduct—or carry—his bride Harriet at the very season of the year when the apples are ripening on the boughs. Mansfield Parsonage has its apricot, which, like Fanny Price, its eventual mistress, has been transplanted at the instigation of Mrs. Norris and paid for by Sir Thomas (the *Price* of the Moor Park apricot is seven shillings), and which takes some time before it becomes established and thrives in the shelter of the stable wall. Delaford has a mulberry tree, a species slow to come to maturity and fruition—perhaps Colonel Brandon isn't such a dry old stick of a husband for Marianne after all! And Pemberley has its hothouse fruits, grapes, nectarines, and peaches, presented just at the moment in the novel when Elizabeth becomes aware of the truth and ripeness of Darcy's affection.

No wonder then that Catherine Morland, looking out of the windows at Woodston Parsonage, joyfully observes, “‘Apple trees too!’” (214). If she is properly indifferent to French bread, she understands the true worth and value to her partnership with Henry of English apple trees.

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