



Suspicious Characters, Red Herrings, and Unreliable Detectives: Elements of Mystery in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

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Catherine, at any rate, heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty. (*Northanger Abbey* 247)

THE WORKS OF Jane Austen, claimed by readers of every possible background and interest, defy attempts at easy categorization. They transcend what current publishers like to call “niche,” even as they attempt to create one by piling bookstore tables with Austen-homage literature. It is possible, however, to view Austen's writing through various prisms—feminist, romantic, historical, and the like—and derive fresh insights from each lens. Even writers of the modern mystery genre are eager to claim Jane as one of their own: in the architecture of her stories they discern many of the classic planks of detective fiction.

At the core of each of Austen's novels lies a social solecism—a *crime*—shocking enough to upset the natural order of her characters' bucolic world, a crime that demands investigation, exposure, and resolution so that peace and order may be restored. Wickham lies, contracts debts, and seduces girls of fifteen; Willoughby abandons both Marianne and his pregnant mistress and marries for money; Frank Churchill commits fraud by forming a secret engagement with one lady while flagrantly pursuing another. In *Northanger Abbey*, the mercenary General Tilney ruthlessly ejects young Catherine Mor-

land from his home without explanation or concern for her safety. Murder? Hardly. But it is Austen's genius to offer each of her heroines a mystery she must solve—and through its resolution, secure order and happiness in her future life. In this, Austen anticipated the modern detective novel. As W. H. Auden notes, "The fantasy, then, which the detective story addict indulges is the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law" (24).

What does Auden intend to convey by that phrase "love as love and not as the law?" I think he regards the resolution of a detective plot—the restoration of order and peace in a broken community—as being founded upon a spirit of mutual forgiveness; founded, moreover, upon the acknowledgment and acceptance of human frailty within the community itself. The quality of mercy is tested by the destructive force of crime, but once murder is out—once order is restored and the guilty punished—it is love rather than the colder justice of law that heals a community's wounds. How then does Auden's vision of the classic detective novel illuminate *Northanger Abbey*?

Auden was an avid mystery reader, and in his effort to explain the genre's appeal, he invoked Aristotle's concept of tragedy as Concealment and Manifestation. That which is hidden must be divined, understood, and exposed by the detective so that conflict is resolved and order is regained. Auden described the essentials of the detective novel in terms immediately familiar to Austen readers: a *closed* society, preferably one closely-related—"3 or 4 Families in a Country Village" (9 September 1814); an *innocent* society in a state of grace, where the commission of the crime signals that one member of the circle has fallen, and thus precipitates conflict; a society characterized by *ritual*, which is a sign of harmony between the aesthetic and the ethical. Auden adds that the "fallen" member uses his knowledge of his society's rituals to commit his crime and is only exposed and overcome by one who possesses a superior knowledge of that world (18-20). George Wickham, for example, seduces Lydia Bennet in a fashionable watering-place at the height of the summer season's rituals—exactly the same methods and milieu he employed with Georgiana Darcy—and it is Fitzwilliam Darcy's superior knowledge of Wickham's history, methods, vices, and confederates that successfully resolves the "crime" against Lydia and restores order to the Bennets' world.

It is simplest, however, to look at the men and women of *Northanger Abbey* according to their roles in a detective plot. Some investigate; some scatter clues; others deliberately play the role of red herring—diverting both reader and heroine from the scent of the investigation with false information

or suspicious behavior, much as Dorothy Sayers's golf-playing, oil-painting Scottish suspects obscure the true perpetrator in *The Five Red Herrings*. Catherine Morland commands a dual role in *Northanger Abbey*: she is both principal detective and potential victim.

At the heart of *Northanger Abbey* is the chief mystery central to all of Austen's work: a young woman's effort to penetrate the veil between herself and—rather than Laurentina's skeleton as Catherine imagines—the male half of her world. In Austen's day, a girl of seventeen like Catherine had few sources of information about the gentlemen she met. They were mysteries that demanded female investigation, but they were judged and understood primarily through their appearance, manners, and conduct at social gatherings. Catherine, for example, notes these aspects of Henry Tilney: "He talked with fluency and spirit—and there was an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by her" (25). Hearsay and subjective observation, rather than verifiable data, supplied the evidence a girl weighed in her investigation of a potential suitor.

Catherine embarks on her detective adventure a naïve and innocent child—she exists in that state of grace Auden warns is ripe for upheaval. Austen intends us to appreciate Catherine's simplicity as a detective's valuable tool, once she surrounds the girl with artifice and betrayal (Isabella Thorpe), not to mention a confusion of motives (General Tilney). When Isabella accuses Catherine of falsely encouraging the attentions of her brother John, Catherine resorts to the devastating power of fact: "But my opinion of your brother never did alter; it was always the same. You are describing what never happened" (146). Austen shows us that Catherine is too sensible to be taken in; her inherent honesty "detects" what is false in others. When confronted with John Thorpe's confusing braggadocio, for example, "Catherine listened with astonishment; she knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing. . . . Her own family were plain matter-of-fact people, . . . not in the habit therefore of telling lies to increase their importance, or of asserting one moment what they would contradict the next" (65-66). Although she is a novice in detection, Catherine's innocence supplies her with an important shield: "If I could not be persuaded into doing what I thought wrong, I never will be tricked into it" (101). Catherine cannot err so long as she trusts her native common sense; "guided only by what was simple and probable, it had never entered her head that Mr. Tilney could be married" (53).

Catherine's exposure to the more sophisticated members of her Bath circle sharpens, rather than weakens, her detecting skills. She learns not to rely

on those who lack substance: “Catherine inquired no further; she had heard enough to feel that Mrs. Allen had no real intelligence to give” (69). She learns to defend herself against duplicity: “How could you deceive me so, Mr. Thorpe?—How could you say, that you saw them driving up the Lansdown-road?” (87). She learns to appreciate a better detective than herself: “How quick you are!” cried Catherine: ‘you have guessed it, I declare!’” (204). And finally, she learns what every Austen heroine must, that a man’s motives are not always obvious or pure: “I do not understand what Captain Tilney has been about all this time. Why should he pay her such attentions as to make her quarrel with my brother, and then fly off himself?” (218).

When Catherine abandons her native common sense—when, as a detective, she misinterprets clues and ignores fact—she errs wildly. Observing that General Tilney never frequents his late wife’s favorite walk, and that he has refused to hang her portrait in his room, Catherine finds “proof” of the most sinister guilt: General Tilney is coldly insensible—therefore he *must* have murdered or imprisoned his wife. “Could it be possible?—Could Henry’s father?—And yet how many were the examples to justify even the blackest suspicions!” (186–87). Catherine’s “examples,” it is important to note, are drawn not from fact but from her addiction to gothic fiction. Brought sharply back to earth by the power of Henry Tilney’s reason, Catherine is mortified to detect the truth of the case behind her lurid imaginings: “Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist” (200).

Henry Tilney is perhaps *Northanger’s* most accomplished detective, a Sherlock Holmes to Catherine’s Dr. Watson. Austen introduces him in the act of cross-examination, with Catherine as witness: “I have not yet asked you how long you have been in Bath; whether you were ever here before; whether you have been at the Upper Rooms, the theatre, and the concert; and how you like the place altogether. . . . [A]re you now at leisure to satisfy me in these particulars? If you are I will begin directly” (25). Like Holmes, who is the author of a monograph on “one hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette, and pipe tobacco, with coloured plates illustrating the difference in ash” (Conan Doyle 219), Henry possesses expert knowledge: he knows his muslins. “I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown” (28). Austen establishes Henry Tilney’s authority early in the novel for a vital reason: not only does he recognize that an inferior muslin will inevitably fray, he knows that a girl steeped in novels must be led astray. “I myself have read hundreds and hundreds.

Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julius and Louisas. If we proceed to particulars, . . . I shall soon leave you . . . far behind” (107).

Henry’s authority positions him as mentor and guide in Catherine’s detective quest; he opposes a fund of worldly experience to her innocent state of grace—experience that at times he deliberately denies her. When Catherine says, “I do not understand you,” Henry replies, “Then we are on very unequal terms, for I understand you perfectly well” (132). When she attempts to subject him to interrogation in turn, he puts a swift end to the game.

“You are a very close questioner.”

“Am I?—I only ask what I want to be told.”

“But do you only ask what I can be expected to tell?” (151)

Worldly experience, as Henry knows, is a dangerous commodity, judiciously shared.

Henry’s privileged information and expert knowledge make him a riveting subject for Catherine’s investigation; he is both her principal mystery to be solved and her closest confederate in detection. She never questions his essential goodness, because she never detects him in deceit. For that, she has Isabella Thorpe and her brother John.

Isabella Thorpe is *Northanger Abbey*’s primary dropper of clues. She strews the streets of Bath with conflicting hints designed to lead Catherine into a bewildering maze. The eternal coquette, Isabella prefers her motives to be hidden to all but a determined investigator. Wild to share the secret of her infatuation with Catherine’s brother James, Isabella flirts with the subject: “I prefer light eyes, and as to complexion—do you know—I like a sallow better than any other. You must not betray me, if you should ever meet with one of your acquaintance answering that description” (42). In choosing Catherine for her detective, however, Isabella chooses poorly; Catherine is too ingenuous to perceive, much less force, a confession, a failing Isabella refuses to recognize.

“Yes, my dear Catherine, it is so indeed; your penetration has not deceived you.—Oh! that arch eye of yours!—It sees through every thing.”

Catherine replied only by a look of wondering ignorance.

(117)

By the time Isabella transfers her affections from James Morland to Captain Tilney, however, Catherine’s ability to analyze clues has improved: “though not allowing herself to suspect her friend, [Catherine] could not help watching her closely” (149).

Isabella shares with her brother John the role of false witness in *Northanger Abbey*. “What one means one day, you know, one may not mean the next. Circumstances change, opinions alter” (146). Unlike John, whose chief fault appears to be exaggeration, Isabella’s hypocrisy is a calculated art: she intends to conquer through prevarication. “Tilney says, there is nothing people are so often deceived in, as the state of their own affections, and I believe he is very right” (147). Isabella confuses and puzzles Catherine at the outset of their acquaintance, but she ends by supplying important instruction. As Isabella declares early in the novel, “There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature” (40). Her love for Catherine takes the form of teaching the young detective not to believe a word of Isabella’s testimony.

Austen abandoned subtlety in crafting John Thorpe, Isabella’s brother; he stands as one of the broadest caricatures in her novels and is thus in danger of being dismissed by reader and detective alike. But Thorpe’s penchant for overstatement and self-contradiction serves a vital purpose in *Northanger Abbey*: he is the Red Herring who misdirects General Tilney’s investigation of Catherine. Thorpe’s false testimony precipitates the social crime that aborts Catherine’s relations with the Tilney family and thrusts her outside the Northanger fold in an abrupt and brutal fashion. When General Tilney interrogates Thorpe about Catherine’s prospects and fortune, “by merely adding twice as much for the grandeur of the moment, by doubling what he chose to think the amount of Mr. Morland’s preferment, trebling his private fortune, bestowing a rich aunt, and sinking half the children, he was able to represent the whole family to the General in a most respectable light” (245). Henry’s father loses no time in attempting to secure such a desirable heiress for his son and invites Catherine to Northanger. John Thorpe, disappointed in his own hopes of Catherine’s hand, then recants his testimony—and informs the General that the Morlands “were, in fact, a necessitous family; numerous too almost beyond example; by no means respected in their own neighbourhood, as he had lately had particular opportunities of discovering; aiming at a style of life which their fortune could not warrant; seeking to better themselves by wealthy connexions; a forward, bragging, scheming race” (246). Thorpe serves Austen’s purpose: he incites the social crime that causes Catherine’s world to erupt in disorder.

General Tilney, whose motives are entirely mercenary (is there a worse epithet in the Austen oeuvre?), roars back to Northanger Abbey and summarily ejects Catherine from his house, to the horror of her friends and relations.

Although hardly murderous, the General's ruthless behavior proves Catherine's detective instincts correct: he is a "fallen" member of Auden's Edenic circle, whose crime—*greed*—distorts the hopes, affections, and destinies of his children and those they love.

It is for that expert detective, Henry Tilney, to expose the General's vicious flaw, hear his confession, discern his true motives, reject Thorpe's false testimony, and restore Catherine's world to a state of grace—by fulfilling all the hopes her investigation of Henry Tilney first inspired. By righting the criminal wrong, Henry manages to save even his father—and, with time, the happiness of the entire Tilney circle. In the forgiveness and restoration of General Tilney, we see an example of Auden's innocence regained. Through the forgiveness and acceptance of his children, the General experiences love as love—rather than as the law.

Is *Northanger Abbey* a mystery novel? No. But a study of Austen's use of techniques later honed by detective novelists is one way of understanding the plot—and inspires an intriguing question. Given her intense preoccupation with individual motives and complex human relationships—both thrown into sharp relief by the conflict and resolution inherent in detective novels—would she perhaps be writing crime fiction if she were alive today? Her defense of popular fiction in *Northanger Abbey* serves as a poignant rallying cry to mystery writers, whose works, though avidly read as lexicons of the conflicts, mores, and obsessions of our time, are often as disparaged as novels were in Austen's day. "With so many fine books to be read, so much to be studied and known," Edmund Wilson intoned, "there is no need to bore ourselves with this rubbish. . . . [P]aper . . . might be put to better use" (40). In the face of such scalding criticism, a mystery writer must find comfort in the travails of those pens that labored before us. As another essayist points out, "'Only a detective story' is now an apologetic and depreciatory phrase which has taken the place of that 'only a novel' which once moved Jane Austen to unaccustomed indignation" (Krutch 41).

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