



ROMANCE. LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION
IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

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Romance, Language and Education in Jane Austen's Novels

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To John Halperin

Preface

First-time readers of Jane Austen have been known to complain that in her novels nothing happens. Though this is a callow and imperceptive verdict on perhaps the greatest of all English novelists, justice asks that one consider the limits of Austen's fiction, and, in so doing, recognize its provenance, its homeground. Hers is not the world of shipwrecks and battles, murder and mayhem, found in Dickens, Scott or Defoe. Some sensational things happen in Austen's works, but they occur on the verge, the underbelly, of the tale. The duel between Willoughby and Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, is commented upon so briefly and placidly that a careless reader might fail to know it happened at all. Elopements and illegitimate children, harrowing sea-battles and naval disasters, can be found, but they are in the backorder of narrative business.¹

To imply, however, that because Austen's narratives shun large actions they centre on small is misleading. On the contrary, action as such is not her focus at all. Her realms are language and its power. The novels pulse with an unvaried rhythm: the heroine speaks with other characters in one scene, then speaks to herself in another. The rhetoric of public exchange turns to that of private reflection and then back again. The shifting scenes of parlour, carriage, ball, promenade, are all subordinate to the goal of displaying words. And words, not actions, are the forces in Austen's fiction. What one does is augured, even preordained, by what – and how – one speaks and thinks. When Mary Crawford reacts crudely to the elopement of her brother with Mrs. Rushworth in *Mansfield Park*, we hear Austen's voice through Edmund's when he explains that Mary's words, her habits of thought and speech, are responsible. There is no division in Austen's moral philosophy between the verbal expressions of the self and the self entire. Language is character; character, language.

Education is thus subordinate to rhetoric. One must learn to employ the vocabulary of moral judgment and action before right thought and conduct can exist. But the process of rhetorical education is also one of romance. That is, the central conflict in each novel is between the hero and heroine; their moral, intellectual and linguistic opposition defines the progress of education and growth.

Only in *Sense and Sensibility* is this educative interplay between hero and heroine absent; as we shall see, this deficiency is the novel's principal weakness. In general, Austen's heroines undergo a linguistic rehabilitation chiefly through the dynamics of love. For though the heroes are not the only characters who provoke growth in the heroines, they are the most important ones. Nor is this process any less apparent when the heroines educate the heroes, as happens in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. Because Austen's novels end, without exception, in marriage, we find in the last pages of each novel a dual celebration of victorious love and linguistic maturity. Love asunder is always a chasm of words; love conjoined, honest and open communication. Towards an understanding of this linguistic – and romantic – process this study is directed.

The most productive way to trace the progress of a heroine's education is to follow her changing habits of speech. None of Austen's heroines begins as an Eliza Doolittle; that is, none begins at a merely rudimentary stage of linguistic competence. They are all well-mannered, well-intentioned, and (with the exception of *Northanger Abbey's* Catherine Morland) intelligent. Their educations require only that their use of language be honed; a revolution of words is never required. The imaginative heroines – Elizabeth Bennet, Marianne Dashwood, Catherine Morland and Emma Woodhouse – all learn to chasten their licentiousness of speech. They learn to abjure the temptations and charm of an ego-directed language. Austen is particularly concerned with the dangers posed by an excessive reliance on wit on the one hand, and on the romantic imagination on the other. The former flaw Austen saw in herself; she knew that wit without feeling can be indiscriminate, amoral and destructive. The latter flaw she saw everywhere in her contemporaries. The Georgian era was the heyday of the Gothic novel, the novel of sentiment, and the cult of sensibility. The adherents of sensibility promoted an exaggerated emotional and aesthetic response to life. Marianne Dashwood's 'passion for dead leaves', for instance, is an expression of sensibility at its silliest. The English Romantics were beginning to bloom in Austen's day from this bud of popularized feeling, and though Austen enjoyed some Romantic literature – she admired both the novels and poetry of Sir Walter Scott, for example – romanticism with a lower or upper case 'R' is derided in her fiction. Austen demonstrates repeatedly that an adherence to romance is dangerous. It is no coincidence that Marianne Dashwood's near-fatal illness is brought on by her

lingering among the 'romantic' wet grasses at Allenham. Romantic texts do not govern the world of social commerce which all Austen's characters inhabit. Such a world requires that the values of fact replace those of fiction and that wit be tempered by judgment. These linguistic aims constitute the bulk of what such heroines as Elizabeth, Marianne, Catherine and Emma learn. The rehabilitation of language brings self-government, maturity, happiness; these in turn bring marriage to an eligible hero.

For the silent, passive and truer-judging heroines – Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot – the linguistic element of education is equally vital. Instead of overvaluing the glamour of language – its potential for self-expression – these heroines repress imagination and wit in their quest for selflessness. But selflessness can be selfishness disguised. Austen is critical too of those heroines whose habitual response to outside threats is silence and suppressed emotions. These heroines are by nature cautious and introspective; their characteristic stance is that of the distanced and mute observer. They find communication with others difficult and unrewarding; their soliloquies tell the reader more than their speeches to other characters. These passive heroines must master a lesson very different from that reserved for their extroverted fellows. If an Emma or an Elizabeth is taught to chasten speech, an Anne or a Fanny learns to speak up, to articulate her moral vision instead of relishing self-denial. But for all of Austen's heroines, changing one's self requires that one first change one's rhetoric. Moral and intellectual achievement flows from linguistic accomplishment. A thorough understanding, therefore, of the role of language and the power it has over others during the education of Austen's heroines will tell much about the nature of the education itself. Further, since the rhetoric of education is bounded by the dynamics of romance, the convention of the happy marriage as comedic resolution serves to demonstrate a union of language. When heroine and hero speak with the same voice, resolution and education are complete. Thus all of Austen's novels work towards a harmony of words, a harmony which in itself signals the achievement of love.

* * *

All references to the novels are from *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols (Oxford University Press, 1923) and are cited in the text.

My initial obligation is to Professor Patricia Spacks of Yale University, who first sparked my interest in Austen's fiction, an interest deepened by my tutelage under Professor Elizabeth Langland, then of Vanderbilt University. I am also indebted to Vanderbilt University for supporting my research with a University Graduate Fellowship. I should also like to thank Professors Laurence Lerner, Roy Gottfried, Vereen Bell, Paul Elledge, Harold Weatherby and Luigi Monga for their support and advice, as well as my fellow student of Austen, Glenda Hudson. I extend all-purpose gratitude to Professor Ellen Caldwell, who offered untiring encouragement; I am also indebted to my father, Professor John Garrigues, for his comments on the manuscript, and to my husband Mitch for his patience and loving support. My chief debt is to Professor John Halperin, who oversaw and wisely guided the direction of this study.

L.G.M.

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1

Northanger Abbey: an Escape from Fiction?

Northanger Abbey is the most text-dominated of Austen's novels. As a parody of the Gothic and sentimental novels popular in Austen's day it traces the education of Catherine Morland, a young girl enmeshed in her favourite fictions, these same novels of Gothic horror and sentiment. Catherine must not only escape her reliance on popular fiction; she must also escape her reliance on language as an absolute. At the beginning of the novel, Catherine is a literal reader, both of her favourite novels and of the words of the other characters she encounters. She is entrapped by the fictions which other characters choose to tell about her as well as by those they tell about themselves. In a sense, Catherine's education in *Northanger Abbey* consists of learning to be a good reader, to recognize that it is dangerous to expect language or its fictional constructs to offer a one-to-one correspondence with real life. *Northanger Abbey* is structured like a Chinese box of fictions within fictions within fictions; Catherine's education consists of breaking through each layer of fabrication into a closer approximation of 'reality'.¹ The beginning of the novel features the parodic description of Catherine's qualifications as a heroine and establishes her as an anti-heroine. The end of the novel is equally self-conscious. Austen collapses the fictional design by calling attention to her own role as author and creator and to Catherine's role as character and creation. But between these two points, Catherine learns to be a good eighteenth century empiricist, judging actions instead of words. Her judgment of Henry Tilney provides the one significant exception – as we later shall see.

We are given a good deal of information early in the novel about Catherine's reading habits in her formative years. We are told that 'she never could learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often stupid' (p. 14). Catherine reads for pleasure only, never for instruction, which explains why she learns ' "The Hare and many Friends" ' quickly

but takes three months to master ' "The Beggar's Petition" ' (p. 14). History she finds dull and irrelevant. But Catherine enjoys books 'provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them' and 'provided they were all story and no reflection' (p. 15). Later in her conversation with Eleanor and Henry Tilney at Beechen Cliff, Catherine explains that what she prizes above all in her reading is invention, the faculty of imagination. (An overactive imagination is, of course, a main problem for many of Austen's heroines, from Marianne Dashwood to Emma Woodhouse.) In this valuing of invention and the imagination, Catherine diverges from the practices of her family, 'plain matter-of-fact people, who seldom aimed at wit of any kind; her father, at the utmost, being contented with a pun, and her mother with a proverb' (pp. 65-6). Of their reading, we know only that Mrs. Morland often reads *Sir Charles Grandison* (a mark, for Austen, of good sense; it was her own favourite novel) and moral essays like *The Mirror*, the remedy she offers to the love-lorn Catherine after her return home. Catherine's education by these people of good sense has been, however, scanty.² She is one of ten children, and her schooling – the responsibility of her mother – is limited severely by her mother's necessary absorption with the younger children; Mrs. Morland's 'time was so much occupied with lying-in and teaching the little ones, that her elder daughters were inevitably left to shift for themselves' (p. 15). Catherine's educational environment in this wise seems similar to that of Elizabeth Bennett who lacked a governess but still became educated through self-application, and Austen herself, who had but the briefest of stays at several schools and was largely self-taught by reading in her father's library. Unlike Elizabeth and their fellow author, however, Catherine makes little use of her educational opportunities. For while Austen seems to praise the sense of Mrs. Morland, who 'did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste' (p. 14),³ Austen at the same time seems to criticize Catherine's lack of any real education. Significantly, the only book the practical Mrs. Morland gives Catherine at the outset of her daughter's journey to Bath is a little account-book in which to record amounts spent on various purchases. Consequently, by the age of seventeen Catherine's storehouse of knowledge can best be described as either homiletic or novelistic; she has read a good many novels and has culled a small collection of well-known quotations. These alone

must serve as guides in her first encounter with the larger worlds of Bath and Northanger.

A parallel to Catherine's poor education in books is her poor education in the ways of the world. Her life at Fullerton has been bereft of opportunities for social development; as Catherine tells Henry Tilney later, at Fullerton 'I can only go and call on Mrs. Allen', an admission Henry quite accurately terms 'a picture of intellectual poverty' (p. 79). There have been, moreover, no opportunities for romance in her quiet village home, and Catherine's only admiration from male quarters has been 'very moderate and very transient' (p. 16).⁴ What she expects of the larger world is what she has found in her novels and in her quiet life at Fullerton. Her social unsophistication, coupled with her poor linguistic skills, make a dangerous combination. Unaccustomed either to a larger social environment or to language employed in the service of falsity and hypocrisy, Catherine naturally fails to assess correctly such events as John Thorpe's 'proposal' or Isabella's hints about her interest in Catherine's brother, James. Because her family 'was not in the habit . . . of telling lies to increase their importance, or of asserting at one moment what they would contradict the next' (p. 66), Catherine's education at home has left her with inadequate means of detecting deceit and falsehood. But if Catherine is ever to judge the moral nature of those around her, she must learn to distinguish between assertions on one hand and actions on the other. In other words, Catherine must learn to be an empiricist, valuing the evidence of her sense, especially of her vision, over the often faulty declarations of her acquaintances. Time and again Catherine is confronted with a situation in which a character says one thing and does another, and her characteristic reaction is bafflement rather than moral judgment. This situation must repeat itself in various permutations before Catherine becomes capable of drawing conclusions about the disparity between word and deed.

Catherine's inability to distinguish correctly the false word from the true is due, however, not only to her naïveté but to her egotism. We first detect this quality in her debut at the Upper Rooms. The evening has been a failure: she and Mrs. Allen are without acquaintance, the rooms are crowded, and they have been forced to intrude upon another party's table at tea-time. Yet as they leave the room, two young men take notice of Catherine, calling her a pretty girl. Hearing this praise changes Catherine's estimation of the

evening: 'Such words had their due effect; she immediately thought the evening pleasanter than she had found it before . . . and went to her chair in good humour . . . perfectly satisfied with her share of public attention' (p. 24). Such a reappraisal is human and harmless enough, but her next misjudgment, involving John Thorpe, Isabella's boorish brother, has more complicated consequences. After Catherine's first encounter with him, James solicits her opinion. Catherine has seen little to like in the man, but he has engaged her for the first two dances of that evening and Isabella has assured her that he thinks her 'the most charming girl in the world'. So, acting under these flattering inducements, Catherine tells her brother that she likes Thorpe 'very much' (p. 50). The narrator excuses Catherine, citing her age and general lack of vanity, but this initially incorrect assessment of Thorpe is perhaps partly to blame for his subsequently dangerous attentions. They are dangerous because Catherine's eventual rebuff leads him to tell General Tilney the virulent falsehoods which result in Catherine's expulsion from the Abbey. Flattery is also in part to blame for Catherine's initial approbation of General Tilney. In their first encounter he praises her slavishly (John Thorpe has told him that she is an undisputed heiress of many thousand pounds *per annum*), 'saying everything gallant' and 'admiring the elasticity of her walk'. Going home, Catherine sees herself in the General's flattering terms, 'walking, as she concluded, with great elasticity, though she had never thought of it before' (p. 103). These misjudgments are not lasting, even as Catherine's egotism is of a mild variety, but they do have consequences.

Another outgrowth of that egotism is Catherine's expectation that everyone is as honest as she, yet even this charitable vision engenders misjudgments.⁵ Incapable as she is of telling a falsehood or of being witty, she is necessarily hampered in her ability to distinguish either falsehood or wit in the speech of others. One misjudgment which arises from this conjunction between inoffensive egotism and incapacity for wit manifests itself in a conversation between her and Henry (pp. 132-3) in which Catherine imputes to Captain Tilney her own charitable motivations for dancing with Isabella. Henry comments that Catherine's understanding of other people's motives is based solely on what her own motives would be:

'With you, it is not, How is such a one likely to be influenced?

What is the inducement most likely to act upon such a person's feelings, age, situation and probable habits of life considered? – but, how should *I* be influenced, what would be *my* inducement in acting so and so?’

When Catherine protests that she does not understand him, Henry counters by saying that *he* understands *her* ‘perfectly well’. Catherine replies: ‘Me? – yes; I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible.’ This, her one witty statement in the novel, which Henry applauds as an ‘excellent satire on modern language’, is witty exactly because the wit is unintended on Catherine’s part – for her part, she is only saying what she feels to be true, and in doing so expresses her general inability to employ a clever, double-edged use of language.

Catherine is also often in the position of deflating the false or exaggerated statements of others. John Thorpe brags about his horse’s speed and Catherine responds: ‘He *does* look very hot to be sure’ (p. 46).⁶ John declaims against *Udolpho* and then says that the only novels worth reading are by Mrs. Radcliffe; Catherine inevitably corrects him. Henry Tilney, in their first encounter at the Upper Rooms, ironically suggests clichés for Catherine’s journal; Catherine again provides a deflation when she tells him she keeps no journal. These deflations are all unconscious on Catherine’s part; the difficult task before her is to retain the honesty of her responses while at the same time recognizing and valuing that honesty for what it is, a rare commodity in the world of social commerce she inhabits. By seeing that her direct truthfulness is not in the common run of things, Catherine can be brought closer to an understanding of how misleading the use of language generally is.

Catherine is not clever, but she is good; at no point in the novel does she consciously commit an evil deed.⁷ Her mistakes stem from two misjudgments – too much confidence in the honesty of others and in the honesty of what she reads. The first stage of her linguistic education is social; she learns that people do not always say what they mean. The second stage is literary; she learns that books are no measure of the real world. But throughout her education, Catherine maintains a moral superiority over every other character in the novel, and it is this quality the reader – and the other characters – should value.

Her linguistic education begins almost immediately upon her arrival at Bath. Her first entrance into Bath society at the Upper

Rooms provides Catherine with evidence of the too-common gap between word and deed in social intercourse. Her guardian, Mrs. Allen, a woman of uniform vacancy of mind, attempts to soothe Catherine's discomfort at being without acquaintance by repeatedly wishing that Catherine could get a partner: 'For some time her young friend felt obliged to her for these wishes; but they are repeated so often and *proved so totally ineffectual* [my emphasis], that Catherine grew tired at last and would thank her no more' (p. 21). Here is evidence of Catherine's budding empiricism, the first instance in the novel in which we see her taking language literally and then judging its true weight critically, learning that Mrs. Allen's 'placid' good wishes lose their charm through useless repetition.

This same process by which Catherine must judge the disparity between word and deed is more fully established in the relationships Catherine enjoys with the Thorpes, Isabella and John. Nothing could be more conducive to Catherine's education than placing her as Austen does in close connection with two characters who are incapable of speaking a true or sincere word. Every speech of John's and Isabella's is permeated by hypocrisy, selfishness, egotism, and plain deceit; and thus their relationship with Catherine, who cannot consciously tell a lie (p. 86), provides innumerable opportunities for her to gauge the distance between what the Thorpes say and what they do. Isabella is the more sophisticated dissembler of these two siblings. She is appropriately both an expert at social discourse and a prime abuser of language.⁸ One of the first pieces of information that Austen provides about Isabella is that she can 'discover a flirtation between any gentleman and lady who only smiled on each other; and point out a quiz through the thickness of a crowd' (p. 33). Such socially sophisticated abilities are to Catherine 'entirely new' and are duly admired (she herself is incapable of detecting even the flagrant flirtation which develops later between her own brother and Isabella.) Isabella is equally adept at twisting language to her own purposes. Her forte is the breathless pace of a shallow flirt, bubbling with false enthusiasm and careless inconsistencies which attempt to make haste itself a charm. Her carelessness extends even to the determination of such constants as the time of day, about which she is notoriously inexact, challenging James's watch – an exercise of female flirtation – much as Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* disputes with Edmund about the length of their walk at Sotherton.

Isabella's use of language is a combination of careless flattery, inexactitude and exaggeration. Her most common form of description is the superlative: 'the sweetest cloak', 'beautiful as an angel', 'the most conceited creature in the world'.⁹ In Isabella's first extended speech, she claims to have been waiting 'ten ages at least', that she has 'an hundred things to say', and that the morning's prospect of showers almost threw her 'into agonies' (p. 39). Her favourite word is 'amazingly' (significantly a word Henry criticizes in Catherine's vocabulary), used indiscriminately as a synonym for 'very'. This introduction to Isabella also finds her boasting of her loyalty to her friends, in particular to one Miss Andrews, and then dismissing this same Miss Andrews as 'amazingly insipid'. The chapter ends with Isabella claiming that she is 'amazingly glad' to be rid of two unidentified young men who are leaving the Pump Room, only to chase after them in pursuit, all the while asserting her independence from male charms. Such contradictions would indicate to a brighter and more sophisticated girl than Catherine that Isabella is not the person she represents herself as being, but Catherine at this point demonstrates only blank confusion, not judgment: 'Catherine had nothing to oppose against [Isabella's] reasoning' (p. 43).

Catherine's responses to Isabella throughout this whole interchange are noteworthy, especially since here the narrator calls attention to the 'delicacy, discretion, originality of thought, and literary taste which marked the reasonableness of [their] attachment' (p. 39). Catherine too is guilty of exaggeration and embellishment, having adopted some of Isabella's mannerisms of speech. Of *Udolpho* she says that 'I should like to spend my whole life reading it' and that had not her appointment with Isabella intervened, she 'would not have come away from it for all the world'. But, unlike Isabella, Catherine does not distort time to suit her purposes, for she knows that it is 'but just one'; she is embarrassed by Isabella's flattery, and she quite reasonably attempts to dampen Isabella's inflaming hints about the now-mysterious Mr. Tilney. She further deflates Isabella's contention that men are 'amazingly impertinent' with her own statement that 'they always behave very well to me', and shows her naïveté by failing to comprehend the meaning of Isabella's hint about her preference for a sallow complexion (presumably James Morland is *not* ruddy). As Austen notes, Catherine '[is] not experienced enough in the finesse of love, or the duties of friendship, to know

when delicate raillery was properly called for, or when a confidence should be forced' (p. 36).

Catherine judges John Thorpe more ably than she does his sister, primarily because his falsehoods and rudeness are less sugar-coated, more intrusive (his continual cursing provides an indication of character as well). Catherine's initially poor opinion is temporarily mitigated by his flattery, but she is not long in determining that she dislikes him. He is her first experiential example of a liar and a braggart, and her understanding of his true character is aided materially by the extraordinary gap between his claims and the indisputable proof of visual observation.¹⁰ One example will suffice to show how useful John Thorpe is in Catherine's education, how clearly he provides proof that assertion is often little based on truth. Thorpe has first claimed that James' gig is a rickety, unsafe affair: 'I would not be bound to go two miles in it for fifty thousand pounds' (p. 65). Realizing that he has frightened Catherine, he changes his tune: 'the carriage is safe enough. . . . I would undertake for five pounds to drive it to York and back again without losing a nail'. Catherine's initial reaction to these contradictory statements is astonishment, but then she begins to reason and concludes that the carriage is in fact safe. Her education has begun in earnest. By the end of his carriage drive, Catherine has reached an important step in her growth towards independent, logical thought:

Little as Catherine was in the habit of judging for herself, and unfixed as were her general notions of what men ought to be, she could not entirely repress a doubt, while she bore with the effusions of his endless conceit, of his being altogether completely agreeable. (p. 67)

She is staunch enough a few evenings later at the Pump Room to decline with simple determination his brash invitation to dance, and when she finds out his falsehood in the débâcle of the Blaize Castle outing he no longer has any of her sympathy. In fact, after she sees the Tilneys walking towards her lodgings (Thorpe has just claimed that he saw them driving out of town), she accuses him of lying: 'How could you deceive me so?' (p. 87). She now knows something more about the nature of deceit.

Catherine's experience with the Thorpes has taught her a necessary social – and linguistic – lesson: that for some people, lies