

# Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Satirizing False Dilemmas in

## Austin's *Northanger Abbey*

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“You can have any color you want - so long as its black.” – Henry Ford

“The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum.” – Noam Chomsky

Although Austin portrays Henry Tilney and John Thorpe as polar opposites, her real goal in creating such a stark contrast is to emphasize how similar they are. Austin is making a statement about the superficial choices her society presented to women: they were asked to choose between “enlightened” men like Tilney and neanderthal men like Thorpe. In fact, Tilney and Thorpe do represent opposite ends of a spectrum, just not a spectrum that actually matters much. She hints that despite their outward appearance, both men hold similar views towards women.

Austin goes to great lengths to paint John Thorpe as a villain and Henry Tilney as a hero, but underneath the words, she portrays them as being very similar. For example, both Tilney and Thorpe take over conversations and steer them to topics of which Catherine has neither interest nor knowledge. This gives them the freedom to pontificate without risking the danger of being

challenged. Consider the time when Catherine was riding with Thorpe on their way to the castle (53):

“Thorpe’s ideas then all reverted to the merits of his own equipage, and she was called on to admire the spirit and freedom with which his horse moved along, and the ease which his paces, as well as the excellence of the springs, gave the motion of the carriage. She followed him in all his admiration as well as she could. To go before or beyond him was impossible. His knowledge and her ignorance of the subject, his rapidity of expression, and her diffidence of herself put that out of her power; she could strike out nothing new in commendation, but she readily echoed whatever he chose to assert, and it was finally settled between them without any difficulty that his equipage was altogether the most complete of its kind in England, his carriage the neatest, his horse the best goer, and himself the best coachman.”

This passage has Austin in the guise of the narrator lamenting the fact that Catherine could do nothing but agree since the topic of conversation had been chosen for that purpose. The conclusion of Thorpe’s “conversation” is nothing but a testament to his own ego. Austin provides further evidence for that assertion when she explains a short while later that “all the rest of his conversation, or rather talk, began and ended with himself and his own concerns” (55).

As we might have expected, Thorpe is portrayed in a rather poor light, but Tilney, the male hero of the book, fares little better in this regard. Recall the scene where Catherine and the two Tilneys are walking near the cliffs (89):

“she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge, declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in

everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste.”

When Catherine was with Thorpe, she inevitably agreed with him that he was the greatest coachmen in all the world, etc., etc. But here, she is equally ignorant of the subject at hand and ends up agreeing completely with Tilney, “[seeing] beauty in everything admired by him.” The techniques Tilney and Thorpe use differ, but the end result is the same: Catherine cedes authority and control to the male. In some ways, this case is even worse since Austin implies that Catherine was not so ignorant as Tilney made her feel. The narrator describes her shame as “a misplaced shame” (93).

Austin’s sarcasm becomes almost palpable in Tilney’s “natural taste” comment; Any taste that Catherine had at that point consisted only of the regurgitated opinions that Tilney himself held. The precise phrasing Austin used for the last sentence is particularly suggestive: Tilney became satisfied because “her attention was so earnest.” What matters to Tilney is the attention Catherine showers on him.

Note that even though both Tilneys were conversing about landscapes before, only Henry lectures now. It wouldn’t do to have an equally competent woman stealing Henry’s thunder, and certainly not his little sister. It is telling that Austin chose a younger and not an older sister for him as well as choosing to leave his mother outside of the story altogether. That way we never see how he would behave in a situation where he had to deal with a female who was at least nominally above him in rank.

As a final illustration of Tilney’s willingness to lecture on topics his audience had neither interest nor knowledge, consider this passage where the narrator describes Tilney directing the conversation (94):

“and by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment and the withered oak which

he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the enclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics, it was an easy step to silence. The general pause which succeeded his short disquisition on the state of the nation was put an end to by Catherine”

Austin has made it clear throughout the book that Catherine would have little patience for a lengthy discussion on the enclosure of public lands and politics. In fact, she changed the subject at the first opportunity.

Austin has several reasons for having both Thorpe and Tilney engage in these monologues. In particular, it exposes the vanity of both characters to the reader and gives a glimpse into how they see themselves in relation to women. By taking the role of teacher, they assume the role of superior; they become, in effect, the patient parental figure lecturing a wayward child. Of course, they never ask Catherine to reciprocate and lecture them on topics they know nothing about. The goal here is not education, but subtle reinforcement of dominance.

Another trait Tilney and Thorpe share is their motivation for conversing with Catherine: vanity. In describing Catherine’s reactions to Thorpe’s outlandish contradictions, the narrator comments how ill prepared Catherine was for dealing with Thorpe since she had not been brought up to realize “how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead” (54). The narrator further explains that Catherine’s parents “were not in the habit therefore of telling lies to increase their importance” (54). These passages show Austin, speaking with the narrator’s voice, condemning Thorpe not for his lies but for the vanity that motivated them.

Later on, when Catherine is lamenting her ignorance on landscapes before Henry Tilney, the narrator steps in and explains what a virtue her ignorance is in this case (93):

“Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a

well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.”

Again, Austin is commenting, in the guise of the narrator, that Henry could not love Catherine without the ego stroking only her ignorance could provide him. Tilney wasn't interested in a partner, but rather a lap dog that would shower him with affection, devotion, and complete obedience while never forgetting (and never failing to remind him) who the master was.

Both Henry Tilney and John Thorpe are interested in only relating to women as superiors rather than peers. Tilney effects an “enlightened” air, preaching the gospel of women's liberation when in reality, his commitment only goes so far as to make himself look good compared to neanderthals like Thorpe. The difference between them is, as a second reading indicates, not how they view women, but how honest they are in showing their common views towards women. Indeed, on first glance, Tilney and Thorpe appear to be separated by a vast chasm. The sharpness of that dichotomy suggests that Austin believed that being able to choose how politely one's husband would treat them as an infant is not much of a choice at all. In short, the author doth protest too much.