View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk brought to you by CORE

秋田県立大学総合科学研究彙報　第11号（2010）：57－64

Doubt and Judgment in *Northanger Abbey*

Satoko Matsumura

1. Introduction

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen's first novel to be completed for publication, Catherine Morland stands at the threshold of life as a heroine. As she moves from Bath to Northanger Abbey after having been away from her own home in Fullerton, she experiences various things she has never done; both in Bath and Northanger, she has to decide what to do when she is exposed to completely new situations. However, she is so young and inexperienced that she is not confident in her own judgment. In many scenes, Catherine is easily surprised or doubtful about something.[1] Indeed, we can see variations of the word "doubt" more than thirty times in *Northanger Abbey*. Because of her naïveté and vulnerable social position as a young woman, she needs someone who can tell her what is right and wrong in order to make a proper judgment; Catherine herself admits that "as to *most matters*, to say the truth, there are not many that I know my own mind about" (126). She often asks questions or asks for advices about something from Mr. and Mrs. Allen or Henry Tilney, the hero of the novel. Throughout the novel, she seems to look for an authority that she can truly rely on. In this paper, I want to examine whether Catherine's character acquires good judgment, and thereafter, I explore her relationship with Henry by focusing on the scenes where Catherine expresses doubts.

2. Who are true friends?

In Bath, Catherine meets two pairs of brothers and sisters, the Thorpes and the Tilneys, and she feels well disposed to both. Bath, however, is a place where one has to be careful about forming new friendships. According to David Wheeler, in the late eighteenth-century, Bath thrived as a leisure city that 10-15 thousand tourists thronged to every year; thus, "social classes mingled in Bath far more than in London or the countryside" (122).[2] In *Emma*, Mr. Elton, after getting the cold shoulder from Emma, goes to Bath and acquires the upstart and vulgar Augusta Hawkins as his spouse. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Colonel Brandon's ward Eliza, who, in Bath, can be "ranging over the town and making what acquaintance" she chooses (237), is seduced by Willoughby. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* occasionally visits Bath even after his marriage to Lydia Bennet, perhaps to enjoy flirtation. Therefore, with a single misstep, it is highly probable that Catherine could encounter promiscuous men such as Willoughby and Wickham and place herself at risk like Eliza. It is only an accident that she enjoys a better fate than Eliza, Lydia, and of course Isabella Thorpe.

Catherine has to discern true friends from false ones, but she cannot make proper judgments at all. The reader, as Marilyn Butler puts it, can distinguish who are more trustworthy much earlier than Catherine herself (173). Butler pays attention to the function of conversations in the novel that reveal each person's habit of mind, but I want to add that Catherine's doubts play the same role. When her doubts and suspicions against someone arise, she cannot pass decisive judgment; instead, the reader can frame the concept of that person.

Her judgment is challenged first in terms of John Thorpe's character. We may say that her experience at the first ball foreshadows her subsequent judgment on the personality of John. Jostled by the crowd without finding any partners for dance, Catherine feels uncomfortable and disappointed. However, her evaluation of the ball undergoes a marvelous change when she overhears two unknown men murmur that she is pretty. This shows that only a single favorable phrase can influence Catherine's judgment to a great degree. Similarly, her assessment of John wavers easily. From the beginning, his manners and his manner of speaking do not please her very much. Based on her own observation, Catherine is about to establish the opinion that John Thorpe is not agreeable; however this opinion becomes distorted by his statement that he thinks that she is "the most charming girl in the world" as well as the fact that he is "James's friend and Isabella's brother" (44). Her opinion is further swayed when John engages her as a dance partner. As the following quotation shows, Catherine clearly has no criterion for judgment.

> 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. It was a bold surmise, for he was Isabella's brother; and she had been assured by James, that his manners would recommend him to all her sex; but in spite of this, the extreme weariness of his company, which crept over her before they had been out an hour, and which continued unceasingly to increase till they stopped in Pultney-street again, induced her, in some small degree, to resist such high authority, and to distrust his powers of giving universal pleasure. (63)

Catherine cannot see through Isabella Thorpe's thin veneer of friendship and sincerity until she receives the final letter from her at Northanger. Thus, at that moment, she still believes that Isabella is the "high authority" of values. Despite all Isabella's and James's assurances, doubts about John's agreeableness linger in Catherine's mind. Her suspicions increase every time she sees him, even though she fails to form a firm opinion. Accordingly, through her doubts, the reader can see John's superficial, inconstant, and self-conceited character much clearer and earlier than Catherine herself.

Without any regard to Catherine's feelings, John forms a private belief that she has given him "explicit encouragement" (127) to reward his affection. It is not only John but also Isabella, James, and even Henry who make blind assumptions about Catherine's feelings and claim that they understand her perfectly. Isabella, for example, declares, "I know you better than you know yourself" (68). She endows Catherine with an imaginary "arch eye" and a nonexistent ability to penetrate her mind, and proclaims that Catherine is the only person who can "judge"

her happiness when she reveals her engagement to James Morland (119). Moreover, responding to her friend's claim of being completely ignorant of John's affection, Isabella says the following:

> I do not pretend to determine what your thoughts and designs in time past may have been. All that is best known to yourself. A little harmless flirtation or so will occur, and one is often drawn on to give more encouragement than one wishes to stand by. But you may be assured that I am the last person in the world to judge you severely. All those things should be allowed for in youth and high spirits. (148)

Here, seemingly, Isabella disclaims her friend's wrong intention of deceiving her brother, saying she cannot judge Catherine's conduct, but in fact, she determines that Catherine clearly intends to flirt with John. It is not Catherine, but Isabella who is fickle, so the latter hangs her secret "designs" on the former. Justifying her own flirtation with Frederick Tilney, Isabella only satisfies her own vanity through Catherine.

James Morland also jumps to the conclusion that, winning Isabella's friendship, Catherine must be happy in Bath, without examining her situation and feelings closely. He adds definitively, "it would be impossible for you to be otherwise" (45). Indeed, his statement only reflects his own happy feeling from seeing Isabella. Catherine just confirms what her brother says at that time, but later she begins to "doubt the happiness of a situation which confining her entirely to her friend [Isabella] and brother" (69), since they give little attention to her and virtually exclude her from their conversation. The Thorpes' and her brother's selfishness and thoughtlessness are further revealed when they insist that she must cancel the promise to take a walk with the Tilneys. Isabella's unkind and ungenerous self-assertion makes Catherine doubt her friendship even more. As her doubt grows, the Thorpes seem to increasingly enforce their repressive attitudes towards Catherine: they place her in uncomfortable situation not only by bitterly reproaching her but also by holding her hands in order not to let her go explain herself to Miss Tilney. In short, they try to repress her both by mentally and physically (Duckworth 95).

Even when Catherine is firm in her resolution not to break her promise with the Tilneys twice and she feels "herself to be in the right" (98), her conviction fades away before she reaches home. Not until she is assured by Mr. Allen that her conduct has been right does she achieve a peaceful mind. Although Catherine repeatedly doubts John's agreeableness and Isabella's friendship during her stay in Bath, she always stops short of passing final judgment on them. Mr. Allen is a sensible man, but Catherine cannot always depend on him because his time is occupied with the treatment of gout, and Mrs. Allen is an empty-headed woman, so she cannot rely entirely on her. In addition, it may be reasonable to suppose that the many pleasures Bath provides do not allow Catherine to dwell on one doubt. Balls, concerts, theaters, shopping, and reading novels in Bath distract her, and she hardly has the opportunity to exercise her judgment. It is in Northanger that she nurtures her doubts, this time toward General Tilney, which lead to her suspicion that he is a murderer.

3. Is Henry Tilney a good teacher?

It is noteworthy that Henry, like Isabella and John, tends to define Catherine's

thinking, saying "I understand you perfectly well" (135). However, unlike Isabella and John, who impose their self-conceited feelings and inclinations upon Catherine, taking advantage of her simplicity, Henry seems to deduce Catherine's feelings from his general knowledge. In short, based on probability, he assumes what she should think; for example, he decides prematurely that Catherine "ought to be tired [of Bath] at the end of six weeks" (76) because many people who have come to Bath say so.

Henry's attitude to her, however, also has some problems. The scene where Catherine meets Henry for the first time is important because the conversation in this scene shows the epitome of their relationship hereafter.

> "I see what you think of me," said he gravely—"I shall make but a poor figure in your journal to-morrow."
>
> "My journal!"
>
> "Yes, I know exactly what you will say: Friday, went to the Lower Rooms; wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings—plain black shoes—appeared to much advantage; but was strangely harassed by a queer, half-witted man, who would make me dance with him, and distressed me by his nonsense."
>
> "Indeed I shall say no such thing."
>
> "Shall I tell you what you ought to say?"
>
> "If you please."
>
> "I danced with a very agreeable young man, introduced by Mr. King; had a great deal of conversation with him—seems a most extraordinary genius—hope I may know more of him. *That*, madam, is what I *wish* you to say."
>
> "But, perhaps, I keep no journal."
>
> "Perhaps you are not sitting in this room, and I am not sitting by you. These are points in which a doubt is equally possible. Not keep a journal! How are your absent cousins to understand the tenour of your life in Bath without one? ..." (18-19)

Here, Henry teaches Catherine how to write and decides what she ought to write. Catherine's "perhaps" is "a polite form of contradiction" (Miller 244), but Henry does not address her seriously and tries to cast her into the conventional mold of a typical young woman on the premise that they should write journals. The same can be said of the subsequent scene. Catherine, who listens to the conversation between Henry and Mrs. Allen, suspects that he might indulge "himself a little too much with the foibles of others" when he surprises her by asking "What are you thinking of so earnestly?" (21). Again, he does not accept her claim that she does not think of anything and decides the way she answers, saying "That is artful and deep, to be sure; but I had rather be told at once that you will not tell me" (21).

Henry's bewildering manner of speech embarrasses Catherine at first, but soon her attachment to him leads her to rely totally on him. If she has any doubts, now she can ask him. Further, if her opinion is different from his, she is willing to resign hers because "It was no effort to Catherine to believe that Henry Tilney could never be wrong" (115). It is important to note that her perfect confidence in him, however, results in a suspension of her judgment. At the hoped-for country walk to Beechen Cliff, she learns some picturesque vocabulary for viewing landscape from Henry.[3] As a result, these words prevent her from admiring and expressing what she feels directly. That she begins to "see beauty in every thing admired by him" (113) means no more than that she attempts to internalize Henry's viewpoint.

Henry is particular about dictions, and he teases Catherine and Eleanor when they loosely use words such as "nice" and "amazingly." Claudia L. Johnson points out that the "characteristic masculine activity in *Northanger Abbey* is measurement, a fiatlike fixing of boundaries ... in Henry's case, of words" (38). With his sense of words, he can disentangle the misunderstanding between Catherine and Eleanor: for Catherine, "something very shocking" (113) means just a new gothic novel, and for Eleanor, it means a riot. His correction, though useful for clearing things up, incurs the possibility of narrowing the various linguistic interpretations. We may say that those various interpretations encourage our powers of cogitation, which can produce the richness of human relationships and provide material for novels. His prescription of words is connected to the kind of control that extends to thought itself (Johnson 38). His nicety about dictions denies the flexible power of words, which could block women's free thinking.

Terry Castle observes that Henry teaches Catherine to figure things out for herself, citing the scene that she requests him to explain why his brother Frederick flirts with Isabella, in spite of his knowing of her engagement to James Morland (xxii-xxiii). In this scene, Henry refuses to answer Catherine's question, saying, though rather teasingly, "let us all guess for ourselves" (155). However, as mentioned above, if he educates Catherine about something, he teaches her to be passive and not to use her own judgment. In this scene, Henry seems to refuse to answer her question only because he does not know exactly what his brother thinks, or he does not want to let her know what he believes Frederick intends to do. Oliver MacDonagh makes a point of the progress of Catherine's education and regards the relationship between Catherine and Henry as a "pupil-master interchange" (84). Henry, however, is far from a good teacher. Thus, as Barbara K. Seeber puts it, he should not be confused with Jane Austen herself (121). Some critics are skeptical about Catherine's development through his education. Alistair M. Duckworth observes that Catherine shows "little psychological development" (92); Rachel M. Brownstein also points out that "Catherine does not in fact change or learn very much" (37).

4. Catherine's doubt of General Tilney and her independent judgment

Indeed, we cannot say that Catherine does exhibit brilliant educational results from Henry's tutelage. When she looks at the facade of Northanger Abbey, she cannot help expressing her deep impression, in spite of her fear that she would not understand the picturesque beauty without Henry. At Woodston too, the moment she sees the pretty room and the view from it, she admires them "with all the honest simplicity with which she felt it" (220). It is clear that in both cases Catherine gives appreciation based on her innate sense of beauty, for she never uses the picturesque vocabulary she learned from Henry. Furthermore, she never stops thinking for herself, though, as we have seen above, Henry has induced her to do so; she secretly cultivates her own doubts about the General, fancying that he may have killed his wife. Despite his outward civility and agreeableness, Catherine cannot enjoy his company. In addition, she cannot fail to see that Henry and Eleanor look downcast in front of their father. Some critics observe that General Tilney's domestic tyranny is represented by his time management (Duckworth 99; Kickel 152-57). On the first day at the Abbey, Catherine is made to realize that "the strictest punctuality" (166)

is required of the family, and the General's menacing voice while ordering dinner makes her shudder.

In addition to his tyrannical punctuality, the General oppresses his children, especially his daughter, by not allowing them to state their opinions. When he shows Catherine around the Abbey, he pretends to ask her and his daughter which part they should look at first, the inside or the outside of the Abbey. Without waiting for their answers, he decides to go to the garden first, saying, "Yes, he [the General] certainly read in Miss Morland's eyes a judicious desire of making use of the present smiling weather" (181). Ignoring Catherine's real wish, the General asserts himself and keeps his regular habit of a walk. Similarly, when a visit to Woodston is planned, the General only considers his and his son's schedule. It seems that he does not even feel the necessity of bothering to ask Catherine and Eleanor for their schedule. That is to say, he rejects to give young women a voice. Whenever he shows Catherine around, he expects her to admire everything she sees passionately. If he thinks her admiration falls short of his expectation, he makes up for her deficit with his own self-complacent comments. Like Isabella, General Tilney often imposes his own feelings upon Catherine. Isabella and General Tilney are also similar in the sense that they are money-conscious and that they never mean what they say (Johnson 44-45). Unlike Isabella, however, the General has power and authority, which can pose a real threat to Catherine. This threat is realized later in the form of her expulsion from the Abbey. As many critics admit, even if Catherine's fancy may be too excessive, it is not very wide of the mark.[4]

Taking into account of these situations, we cannot say that there are no grounds for Catherine's suspicions about the General. True, it is ridiculous, but her doubts of him are derived mainly from her own observation, not from gothic novels. To her, as Brownstein points out, it is logical to imagine that the General must have murdered his wife (39). Furthermore, we should not overlook the effect of Henry's mock-gothic story that he tells her on the way to Northanger. At first, she responds quite rationally to his story, protesting that "I do not think I should be easily frightened, because there would be so many people in the house" (161), but she is gradually drawn into his story, partly because he gives Catherine the role of the heroine in his narrative. Now that she trusts Henry as the authority of values, she does not suspect that Henry would play on her credulity (Johnson 39). Her imagination starts to roam after receiving encouragement from him.

After the adventure of the chest and the cabinet, Catherine feels ashamed of herself, but at the same time she becomes aware that "it was in a great measure his own doing, for had not the cabinet appeared so exactly to agree with his description of her adventures, she should never have felt the smallest curiosity about it" (177). In fact, the cabinet is not the one "so exactly to agree with his description": in Henry's narrative, the old-fashioned cabinet is made of ebony and gold, but the one Catherine finds in her room is "black and yellow Japan" (172). As the famous vindication of novels in chapter five of volume one shows, Jane Austen never criticized the reading novels, including gothic novels. Catherine's problem is reading novels *carelessly*; although she is crazy about Ann Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, she misremembers even the basic elements such as the names of the heroine's father and the former owner of Castle.[5] It is no wonder then that she misapprehends the cabinet to be exactly the same one that Henry described.

Thus, she should be partly blamed in the respect that she distorted what she read and heard, and applied it carelessly to reality; however, Henry is more responsible than Catherine for inducing her to indulge her fancy.

When Henry discovers Catherine's false charge against the General, he attempts to persuade her to use her common sense, reminding her that they are English and Christians.[6] He tries to maintain his father's position as an honest husband, confirming that "His value of her [Mrs. Tilney] was sincere; and, if not permanently, he was truly afflicted by her death" (203). However, it cannot be said that Catherine is easily persuaded by Henry. Even after dispelling her suspicions about General Tilney's being a murderer, and after she is "completely awakened" (204), she still cannot help doubting the General's enigmatic incongruity between words and deeds. Henry also stands up for his brother Frederick when the fact that Isabella has been jilted comes out, though avoiding getting too involved in the matter. Again, Catherine is not completely convinced of his defense and shows her own value judgment with a declaration that she does not like Frederick at all. For General Tilney too, Catherine finally comes to an independent judgment after her unceasing doubts. Hearing accounts of the General's ruthless conduct from Henry in Fullerton, she concludes that "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (256).

5. Conclusion

When Catherine suddenly returns to her home after her expulsion from Northanger Abbey, Mrs. Morland says that "it is a great comfort to find that she is not a poor helpless creature, but can shift very well for herself" (246) as if she is pleased with her daughter's development. In fact, Catherine thinks about nothing but Henry. She ends her journey safely, but not because of the fact that she has her wits about her as Mrs. Morland hopes—only because of "Her youth, civil manners and liberal pay" (240). In Bath and Northanger, Catherine learned that what one said was not always what one meant. She also learned that there was always a possibility that her trust could be betrayed: Isabella's friendship was just an affectation; General Tilney changed his attitude unexpectedly and drove her out of his house. Even Henry did not always answer her doubts; he sometimes gave answers that were beside the point and sometimes ignored her simple, bold questions. Catherine, who placed complete confidence in Henry, seems to be influenced merely on a superficial level by his education. Although he praised her "teachableness of disposition" (179), she remains essentially the same, as Mrs. Morland finds that she is as restless as before: she is still the girl whose "mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity" (225). Henry's education tries to mold Catherine to his own liking, a passive and dependent young lady, but by casting doubts and keeping doubtful eyes, she makes herself think for herself. Catherine seems to rely heavily on Henry, but in actuality, she gradually comes to use her individual judgment. As for the General, the greatest source of doubt she has, she finally arrives at a conclusion of her own.

Notes

1 Christopher R. Miller considers "surprise" to be the key word of *Northanger Abbey*.

2 As to Bath, see also Harris, 160-187.

3 As for the terms describing picturesque beauty and its structural principles, see

Andrews, 29-31.

4 For example, see Duckworth, 99; Johnson, 35; Tanner, 68-69. Butler insists that General Tilney is not a villain but a mere ill-tempered snob (178-79), but her claim is completely refuted by Robert Hopkins who analyzes *Northanger Abbey* in the historical context.

5 The name of the heroine's father is St. Aubert and of the former castle owner is Laurentini. Catherine memorizes the former as St. Aubin and the latter as Laurentina.

6 Henry is too sanguine to grasp the actual conditions in contemporary England. As for the political instability at that time, see Hopkins, 215-17; Tanner, 69-70.

Works Cited

Andrews, Malcolm. *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989.

Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. 1818. Ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

---. *Sense and Sensibility*. 1813. Ed. Edward Copeland. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Brownstein, Rachel M. "*Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*." *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*. Ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 32-57.

Butler, Marilyn. *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. 1975: Oxford: Clarendon, 1990.

Castle, Terry. Introduction. Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, *and* Sanditon. By Jane Austen. Ed. John Davie. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990. vii-xxxv.

Duckworth, Alistair M. *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels*. 1971. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.

Harris, Jocelyn. *A Revolution Almost beyond Expression: Jane Austen's* Persuasion. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2007.

Hopkins, Robert. "General Tilney and Affairs of State: The Political Gothic of *Northanger Abbey*." *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978): 213-24.

Johnson, Claudia L. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.

Kickel, Katherine. "General Tilney's Timely Approach to the Improvement of the Estate in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63 (2008): 145-169.

MacDonagh, Oliver. *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.

Miller, Christopher R. "Jane Austen's Aesthetics and Ethics of Surprise." *Narrative* 13 (2005): 238-260.

Radcliffe, Ann. *The Misteries of Udolpho*. 1794. Ed. Bonamy Dobrée. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.

Seeber, Barbara K. *General Consent in Jane Austen:A Study of Dialogism.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2000.

Tanner, Tony. *Jane Austen*. London: Macmillan, 1987.

Wheeler, David. "Jane Austen and 18th-Century English Spa Culture." *English Studies* 85 (2004): 120-133.