

Who are the fools in *Northanger Abbey*?

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There is no shortage of fools in any of Austen's novels, and *Northanger Abbey* especially has a youthful satirical exuberance which is more subdued in the later novels.

If we think of the fool in Shakespearean terms, Henry Tilney readily springs to mind. In his first conversation with Catherine he has a way of turning on her with a deflating punch-line which is reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Touchstone*:

'As far as I have had an opportunity of judging, it appears to me that the usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars' – 'And what are they?' – 'A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar.'

Touchstone voices satire throughout *As You Like It*, and Henry adds weight to the narrator's satirical views on aspects of society in much the same way. Catherine, though entranced, doesn't know what to make of him at first: "How can you be so –" she had almost said, strange'.

But although his sister upbraids him for his 'odd ways', clearly Henry is the hero of this novel, and despite his whimsical wit he is not a fool in the sense that he lacks judgment or wisdom. He enjoys being a pedant, and deliberately misinterprets Catherine's artless use of expressions like 'nice' and 'she promised me faithfully'. He is only reduced to talking nonsense by happiness in love: on their visit to the Allens at the end of the novel, 'Henry talked at random, without sense or connection', a most unusual state for this most delightful of Austen's heroes. This is a neat ironic reversal, since earlier, in Bath, when Catherine mentioned having to entertain herself at home by calling on Mrs Allen, he had exclaimed, 'What a picture of intellectual poverty!'

Mrs Allen is a fool, but a relatively harmless one. Her 'vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking were such, that as she never talked a great deal, so she could never be entirely silent.' This might seem unkind, but I'm sure we all know someone like this: I know I do! Mr Allen is a sensible man, except, it seems, in his choice of wife, who 'was one of that numerous class of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any man in the world who could like them well enough to marry them.'

Is Henry perhaps similarly wasted on Catherine? Austen playfully discusses the subject:

The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author [Fanny Burney in *Camilla*]; and to her treatment of the subject I will only add, in justice to men, that though, to the larger and more trifling part of the sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable, and too well-informed themselves, to desire anything more in woman than ignorance.

But is Catherine really foolish? She is certainly naïve: as she shows in an early conversation with Eleanor Tilney, after which ‘they parted – on Miss Tilney’s side with some knowledge of her new acquaintance’s feelings, and on Catherine’s, without the smallest consciousness of having explained them’. And it’s true that the words ‘folly’ and ‘foolish’ often appear in relation to Catherine. At the cotillion ball in Bath the narrator talks of Catherine’s ‘self-condemnation for her folly, in supposing that among such a crowd they should even meet with the Tilneys in any reasonable time’; upon finding that the mysterious scroll in the cabinet in her Northanger Abbey bedroom is a laundry list, she thinks, ‘Heaven forbid that Henry Tilney should ever know her folly’. Later, of course, he does ‘find her out’ when he discovers her in his mother’s bedroom, and she despairs: ‘her folly, which now seemed even criminal, was all exposed to him, and he must despise her for ever.’ But Henry is merciful and after a couple of days she’s able to reflect that ‘an occasional memento of past folly, however painful, might not be without use’.

It’s striking how often she is described as being aware of her folly, which is, of course, the beginning of wisdom. As Touchstone says, ‘a fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool’ – and we might observe that Austen specifically refers to the ‘great store of information’ Catherine gained by reading Shakespeare.

There is little doubt that John Thorpe thinks himself very wise, but that he is a paragon of self-deception, as can be seen in the conversation he has with Catherine after Isabella and James become engaged. Catherine is all artlessness and either can’t or won’t understand Thorpe’s intentions. ‘And as to most matters,’ she says, ‘to say the truth, there are not many that I know my own mind about.’ Thorpe responds, ‘By Jove, no more do I! It is not my way to bother my brains with what does not concern me. My notion of things is simple enough. Let me only have the girl I like, say I, with a comfortable house over my head, and what care I for all the rest? Fortune is nothing. I am sure of a good income of my own; and if she had not a penny, why so much the better.’

Catherine might seem rather naively obtuse here, but the amount of inaccuracy in the last paragraph is obvious: It *is* Thorpe’s way to bother his brains with what doesn’t concern him, and he *does* care about money, just as his sister Isabella does. Isabella, however, is more calculating than John: more duplicitous and manipulative, as Catherine realises when she finally receives a letter from her after the engagement with James has been broken: ‘Such a strain of shallow artifice could not impose even upon Catherine. Its inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood, struck her from the very first.’

General Tilney would have to be very foolish himself to be taken in by John Thorpe – to believe his boasts about the Morland family in the first place, and then to take him at his word when Isabella and James’s engagement is broken off and he declares them to be ‘a necessitous family; numerous too almost beyond example ... a forward, bragging, scheming race’. It seems unlikely that a man of the world like the General would believe this nonsense from Thorpe, who couldn’t impose even on the naïve Catherine, but as Anne Ehrenpreis observes in her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of the novel, the General ‘changes as Jane Austen’s requirements for him vary. ... since [his] function is “to promote the general distress of the work” we are not allowed to take him seriously.’

Austen, in her disquisition in praise of folly, says that ‘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 any thing, should conceal it as well as she can.’ ‘Tis folly to be wise’, indeed!

In one sense, all Jane Austen's characters are fools, except the chosen few: the heroine (at least by the end of the novel, if not at the beginning), the hero, and usually one or two others. Some are dupes, some benign, like Mrs Allen; others are dangerous, like the Thorpe siblings. Isabella and John Thorpe in some ways foreshadow the bright, attractive, far more complex Crawfords in *Mansfield Park*, who also befriend the heroine with unhappy results. But Thorpe is a caricature, with no redeeming features apart from his entertainment value to the reader. His foolishness, as well as being a not always convincing plot device, is a yardstick against which all other characters are measured – and none measures up to him in this respect. It is he and others of his type that help Austen create 'the illusion of traveling intimately with a hardy little band of readers whose heads are screwed on tight and whose hearts are in the right place', as Wayne Booth wrote.