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Northanger Abbey and *The Importance of Being Earnest*: a possible echo

In an early chapter of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (published posthumously in 1817), Isabella Thorpe, pretending indignation at being observed by two young men in the pump rooms in Bath, says to her companion Catherine Morland, 'Let us go and look at the arrivals. They will hardly follow us there.'¹ Amidst the hilarious unfolding of the plot in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), when it is revealed that, although no longer engaged to the same man, neither Gwendolen nor Cecily are engaged to a man called Ernest, Gwendolen suggests to Cecily, 'Let us go into the garden. They will hardly venture to come after us there.'²

The indignation, the affectation of retreat, and the linking word 'hardly', with its comic evocation of moral disapproval, suggests a firm link between the two works, and seems to locate a direct source for a key moment in Wilde's play, and an indebtedness to an author he, perhaps rather uneasily, admired. References to Jane Austen are rare but tantalising in his work. She was one of the authors whose works he thought of presenting to the library of Reading Gaol on his release, in order to enliven the lives of 'the poor imprisoned fellows I live with'.³ But other references are ambiguous or double-edged: according to Michael Field, Jane Austen was included in his conception of genius as a partly ruinous force;⁴ while his reference to her in a letter to Robert Ross seems to undermine her art even as it praises: reproving Ross for writing a letter of business merely, and reminding him that he has often written in a different manner, he goes on to say,

Your letter is very maddening: nothing about yourself: no details, and yet you know I love middle-class tragedies, and the little squabbles that build up family life in England. I have had delightful letters from you quite in the style of Jane Austen.⁵

It is intriguing to find, therefore, in a novel which, like Wilde's own work, places art and life in a crucial interdependence, a phrasing which seems to be echoed in the later play; a rendering of that representation of surface brittleness at which both he and Austen were so adept. Isabella Thorpe is a knowing sophisticate, and Catherine Morland by contrast a genuinely straightforward girl, finding her way through the bewildering intricacies of Bath society. They are, for some part of the novel, potential sisters, for Isabella is engaged to Catherine's brother James until she thinks she has found a better catch; after which, Isabella decides that 'there are more ways than one of our being sisters' (NA, 99). Shortly before Gwendolen's suggestion of injured retreat in Wilde's play, the two girls have sworn to call each other sisters, thus confirming Algernon's earlier observation that 'Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first' (IBE, 337). Part of the trajectory of Catherine Morland's educative experience in *Northanger Abbey* is her recognition of Isabella's falseness, and her extrication from her world. In this early encounter in the novel, she is bewildered by Isabella's reaction: why, she asks, after the young men have left the pump room, is Isabella intent on following them, if she does not welcome their attentions? Why not let them go and wait a decent interval before leaving themselves? Wilde would surely have been amused by the absurd, over-sophisticated response from Isabella: 'I have no notion of treating men with such respect. *That* is the way to spoil them' (NA, 27).

Wilde's Cecily, unlike Austen's heroine Catherine, is as steely as her adopted 'sister' Gwendolen, and, beneath her simple rustic appearance, is a match for her in the language of sophisticated pretence, immediately agreeing with Gwendolen's certainty that they will not be followed into the garden with 'No, men are so cowardly, aren't they?' (*IBE*, 367). The agreement marks an important difference between the two works, Cecily's easy catching of Gwendolen's tone a marker both of the necessary pace of the stage play and the way in which the young women in Wilde's play reinforce the values of the world of manners in which they speak. Wilde's young women are counterparts, each echoing, rather than questioning, the language of the other; moving not, like Austen's young women in *Northanger Abbey*, from unexamined friendship towards fracture, but remaining fast within a synthesis which holds together the hilarity, and the undercurrent of tragic restraint, of Wilde's most sparkling comedy; a synthesis enacted in their resolution, early in the following act, to speak simultaneously, Gwendolen concurring eagerly with Cecily's suggestion: 'An excellent idea! I always speak at the same time as other people' (*IBE*, 371).

The two young men in Austen's novel are unnamed and lost, overtaken by Isabella and Catherine only after they have lost interest in them; prevented by the intricacies of the Bath streets and the exigencies of the unfolding plot from receiving any further attention. It is not too fanciful to suppose that Wilde, reading this novel with an ear acute to the tonal possibilities of its dialogue, re-instated them into his own comedy, in which names and lostness are such vital features; and placed them in a situation in which they are bound to return to the world which commands their presence even as it appears to eschew it, and even as it declares that they will hardly venture to follow.

1. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Susan Fraiman (London: Norton, 2004), 27; hereafter *NA*.
2. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Vyvyan Holland (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1990), 367; hereafter *IBE*.
3. Oscar Wilde, Letter to Robert Ross, 6 April 1897, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 790.
4. Michael Field, 'Oscar Wilde', in E.H. Mikhail (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, I (Macmillan, 1979), 198.
5. Oscar Wilde, Letter to Robert Ross, 1 September 1900, in *The Complete Letters*, 1194.
6. *Northanger Abbey*, 99.

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