

“The Neighborhoods of *Northanger Abbey*”

[This essay analyzes the role of place and community in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. Toby Benis investigates the concept of the “neighborhood” in terms not only of geographical space, but also of social space: a neighborhood is not only where one is, but also who one knows. While the “neighborhood” is a distinct and traditional concept in the English countryside—and one that shapes all social intercourse there—in places such as Bath, social interactions take place outside the conventions of an established community. As an itinerant watering place, Bath was a locus of ever-changing communities, in which new “neighborhoods” of acquaintances were constantly being made and dissolved. Benis considers the opportunities and dangers attendant both on the traditional gentry neighborhood of the country estate and the more socially unstable neighborhood of Bath.]

In a pivotal moment in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Catherine Morland commits one of the more significant faux pas in the history of the courtship plot: she tells her suitor, Henry Tilney, that she suspects that his father murdered his mother. Henry grants his father’s cold and difficult temper. But Henry then sets out to reclaim the Tilney estate from its realm in Catherine’s imagination: the continental, Catholic settings of Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novels. Instead, Henry identifies the Abbey as a Georgian country home whose problematic cultural origins have long since ceased to be relevant:

Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you.—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?¹

1 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* [1818], ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye (Cambridge, 2006), 202, 203. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

As scholars have observed, Henry's allusion to "voluntary spies" recalls government methods for silencing political reformers during the politically polarized 1790s.¹ Equally revealing, however, is the invocation here of the range of spaces that act as delivery systems for this topical reference. Henry's speech as a whole provides a useful summary of the social and political spaces in Austen's work, and the kinds of practices associated with each. At the most local level, there is the estate, or in this case the Abbey, the ancestral home of the patriarch. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the nation—"England"—a geographical area whose inhabitants are unified by a shared cultural inheritance and religion, but also by an evolving infrastructure facilitating the movement of people and information. Scholars have attended insightfully to Austen's representations of these nodes of geography.² My own interest lies in the layers of spatial organization at issue in *Northanger Abbey* between the categories of the nation and the country estate, for which Henry Tilney provides a term: the neighborhood. This spatial context is one way of seeing anew the differences between the principal settings of the novel, Bath

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- 1 See Robert Hopkins on General Tilney as an unofficial volunteer of the sort used by authorities to help track, and stamp out, the activities of local reformers ("General Tilney and Affairs of State: The Political Gothic of *Northanger Abbey*," *Philological Quarterly* 57, no. 2 [Spring 1978]: 214–24). Viewed in this light, Henry's naive faith in contemporary English law, religion, and culture to guarantee basic freedoms seems the real object of Austen's satire, rather than the Gothic conventions that cast abductions and murders as commonplace. See also Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2004), 110–11; and Thomas Keymer, "Northanger Abbey and *Sense and Sensibility*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, 2nd ed., ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge, 2011), 21–38, 29–31.
 - 2 The definitive discussion of the centrality of the estate in Austen's corpus remains Alastair M. Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore, 1971; repr. 1994); more recently, Julie Park draws parallels between estate-based picturesque theories of space and female subjectivity in "What the Eye Cannot See: Interior Landscapes in *Mansfield Park*," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 54, no. 2 (summer 2013): 169–81. Chapter 1 of Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London, 1998) charts the locations in Austen's plots in terms of their national connotations, while Paula Byrne's *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* (New York, 2013) lays out in detail Austen's family connections with the far reaches of the British Empire in the East Indies. Chapter 4 of Anne Frey's *British State Romanticism: Authorship, Agency, and Bureaucratic Nationalism* (Stanford, 2009) is one recent exploration of Austen's naval characters in particular in the context of national and international concerns.

and the Northanger estate in Gloucestershire. The events in Bath only can occur because it is in some sense a city without neighborhoods, at least in Henry Tilney's meaning of the term. The setting of Northanger, by contrast, is characterized by an authoritarian style of governance that renders any distinction between the estate and the environs in which it is embedded moot: General Tilney's appetite for total control over spaces and those who inhabit them extends beyond Northanger to envelop the neighborhood beyond.

Amorphous, porous, and interstitial by their very nature, neighborhoods resist clear definition, and in this way might seem to differ from official, administrative units of space in this period such as the parish, the county, or the borough. In fact, however, in the indeterminate nature of its boundaries, one could argue that the idea of the neighborhood is emblematic of pre-Victorian conceptions of space that were local, idiosyncratic, and debatable. The Hanoverian period was the last era in British history when such conceptions operated apart from the demands and procedures of centralized authority. For example, prior to the Ordnance Survey's work in the nineteenth century, written records as to the exact extent of parish boundaries—which in many cases dated back to the Anglo-Saxon period—were virtually non-existent. Where such records did exist, the account tended to be language-based, rather than graphic, as in a map. It was not that such borders were unimportant: parish boundaries established clergymen's tithing rights, and the Elizabethan poor law had made the parish a civil, as well as an ecclesiastical, entity. But the boundaries for such geographical and social units were defined less by officials based in London, than by local tradition and rituals.¹ In a similar vein, Irene Collins in *Jane Austen and the Clergy* advances a definition of neighborhood based not on geographical boundaries per se, but on the possibilities for travel and social intercourse: Austen, Collins writes, "habitually used [the term] with reference to groups of families sufficiently equal in social standing and living near enough to each other to meet regularly for mutual entertainment and companionship—in other words, the social elite of each of the small residential areas which constituted rural England."² Insofar as it emphasizes the regular exchange of visits and news, Collins's description is in line with the meaning of "neighbourhood" offered in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*:

- 1 For an early study on the governmental significance of the parish, see Sydney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act: The Parish and the County* (London, 1906). K.D.M. Snell comprehensively fleshes out the psychological dimension of parish affiliation in the Georgian period (*Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* [Cambridge, 2006]).
- 2 Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (London, 1994), 103.

“1) Place adjoining; 2) State of being near each other; and 3) Those that live within reach of communication.”¹

The Johnsonian definition usefully brings together the dual uses of neighborhood in this period, referencing proximity but also areas which may not be “adjoining” but are, nevertheless, close enough that we might reasonably expect news, ideas, and gossip to flow easily from one district to another. Austen’s letters demonstrate that she gave careful thought to the relationship between community, distance, and the likely flow of information. Corresponding with her niece Anna, Austen muses about how far news could travel and thereby suggests more general ideas about her conceptions of and parameters for neighbors. Anna’s (subsequently abandoned and burned) novel apparently involved the transmission of a piece of information, likely through gossip or “report,” from Dawlish in Devonshire. Where Anna wrote “Lyme” as the destination, Austen offers two alternatives:

Lyme will not do. Lyme is towards 40 miles distance from Dawlish & would not be talked of there.—I have put Starcross indeed.—If you prefer Exeter, that must always be safe.—I have also scratched out the Introduction between Lord P. & his Brother, & Mr Griffin. A Country Surgeon (dont tell M^r C. Lyford) would not be introduced to men of their rank.—And when M^r Portman is first brought in, he w^d not be introduced as the Hon^{ble}—That distinction is never mentioned at such times;—at least I beleive [*sic*] not.²

So at 40 miles, Lyme is certainly too far to be in the neighborhood of Dawlish, if we refer back to Johnson. The alternatives Austen suggests are equally revealing; Starcross, a village on the mouth of the Exe and perhaps 4 miles from Dawlish, appears ideal for this purpose to Austen. Exeter is considerably farther, at about 13 miles, but is still “safe,” presumably because its size and significance as a hub of politics and trade make it an obvious magnet for information from a range of places. Also of interest in this letter is Austen’s swift, transitionless rhetorical move from a discussion of geographical distance to notes on social distinctions. The circulation of news from village to village is allied to an awareness that surgeons and lords do not inhabit the same physical, or social, arenas. The novelist should

1 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1798), 586.

2 Jane Austen, letter to Anna Austen, Wednesday 10–Thursday 18 August 1814, in *Jane Austen’s Letters*, 4th ed., ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford, 2011), 279–81, 280.

understand the likely use, or suppression, of forms of address (the “Honorable”) when a new character enters a room.

Collins’s definition of neighborhood helpfully explains the usage of the term by Frank Churchill in *Emma* (1816), for example, when he asks Emma Woodhouse, “Had they a large neighbourhood?—Highbury, perhaps, afforded society enough?”¹ But the term also appears to designate an environment even when it is devoid of social equals, much less matrimonial prospects: thus, in the opening pages of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen justifies her abrupt removal of Catherine Morland from her native hamlet of Fullerton: “there was not one lord in the neighbourhood; no—not even a baronet. There was not one family among their acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door—not one young man whose origin was unknown. Her father had no ward, and the squire of the parish no children. But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her” (9). Here, the members of the neighborhood are known quantities, none of whom contain the narrative possibilities inherent in the cast of characters of an eighteenth-century novel like Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749). To become a “heroine,” Catherine must leave the neighborhood behind—so Austen promptly transports her to Bath.

Bath is the setting for the novel’s principal social misunderstandings, whose unfoldings are made possible by the abeyance of established community networks and lines of communication. This condition was inextricable from Bath’s identity as the quintessential eighteenth-century British spa-town: Bath was a city of strangers, its population constantly shifting as visitors came and went. Accordingly, an array of compensatory mechanisms emerged to create what we might call neighborhoods of a moment, however temporary, out of districts and the visitors who at any given time resided within them. As new visitors arrived and others left, hierarchies shifted and relationships were thrown into relief, or receded from prominence. Keeping track of who was resident, who was arriving, and who had departed was the dedicated mission of local newspapers as well as figures, such as the masters of ceremonies for the various assembly rooms, responsible for maintaining Bath’s frothy social scene. It fell to the masters of ceremonies to quickly recognize the rank of those entering their sphere and smooth the way for appropriate social interaction. That Catherine and her chaperones, the Allens, are in desperate need of such assistance upon their arrival in Bath is obvious: their first evening out in town is spent amidst a crushing crowd at the

1 Austen, *Emma* [1816], ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge, 2005), 206.

Upper Assembly Rooms, but here and in the coming days, Catherine and the Allens wander from venue to venue in search of “society” and lamenting the absence of what Mrs. Allen calls “acquaintance” (14, 15). This isolation is finally broken by James King, identified by name in the text and actual master of ceremonies in the Lower Assembly Rooms from 1785 to 1805, who “introduced [Catherine] to a very gentleman-like young man as a partner:—his name was Tilney” (17). Tilney is, Mr. Allen is subsequently assured, “a clergyman, and of a very respectable family in Gloucestershire” (22).

No sooner is Catherine introduced to the systems designed to manage Bath spaces and society, however, than she experiences their shortcomings. Such failings are foreshadowed during her first evening with Henry, which features Henry’s famous metaphor of the “country dance” for marriage. During the eighteenth century, the country dance had both national and social associations. It was perceived as a distinctly British dance form, unlike the waltz, for example. Also unlike the waltz, in country dances, couples danced as part of a group, embodying a view of partnership as dependent on a clear sense of social hierarchy.¹ James King himself conveyed this assumption in regulations like the following, printed in the 1798 *New Bath Guide*: “that those who stand up after the country-dance is called, do take their place at the bottom, unless rank entitles them to precedence: And the Ladies are requested not to permit the intrusion of any couples above them, such compliance conferring a partial obligation, to the material inconvenience of those who stand below them.”²

This assumption is furthermore crucial to Henry’s analogy, insofar as he repeatedly invokes the notion of “neighbours” as a key support in his discussion. Criticizing John Thorpe’s intrusive attentions to Catherine during their dance, Henry stipulates that “those men who do not chuse to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbours” (74), and that it is each partner’s “duty, each to endeavor to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbours, or fancying that they should

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- 1 The national and social implications of the country dance are discussed by Cheryl A. Wilson in *Literature and Dance in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Jane Austen to the New Woman* (Cambridge, 2009). In Wilson’s reading, the dance scenes of *Northanger Abbey* demonstrate that Catherine’s romantic success depends on her learning to negotiate the kinds of hierarchies at work in polite society. For more on the country dance versus the waltz, also see Erin J. Smith, “Dancing in a New Direction: Jane Austen and the Regency Waltz,” *Persuasions Online* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2010).
 - 2 *New Bath Guide* (Bath, 1798), 25.

have been better off with any one else” (74–75). In Henry’s argument, the mechanics of the country dance enact the careful modulation required by partners upon marriage. At any given moment, lines of dancers stand in for the community’s spatial proximity and social claims: by definition the dance is a group endeavor. Yet partners also are set off from surrounding or adjacent dancers, and the former must define zones of attention marked off from the group, itself an act in some measure dependent on acknowledging the existence of the collective. The category of the neighbor is the linchpin of this dynamic, a presence existing in a borderland where belonging and distance, or difference, exist simultaneously.¹ This figure embodies marriage’s dual status as a “contract” between two individuals and a relationship that acquires its full meaning by virtue of its orientation towards others we know and who know us.

One of the difficulties with Henry’s argument is that Bath, the site of this conversation, is an environment where the idea of the neighbor, along with the social hierarchies the country dance supposedly embodies, is problematic. To this extent, confusion over the status of Bath developer Ralph Allen’s real-life financial legacy during the turn of the nineteenth century, which Janine Barchas has argued lies behind John Thorpe’s mistaken belief that Catherine is a rich heiress, is of a piece with a culture of ambiguity suffusing Bath’s social interactions in the late eighteenth century.² In this scene, John Thorpe obviously does not feel bound by any understanding of a “neighbourly” role Henry would recognize, or concern himself with, in King’s words, the “material inconvenience” of others. Catherine

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- 1 Michel de Certeau’s discussion of the frontier offers another lens through which to conceptualize the position of the neighbor, and by extension the neighborhood, in this conversation. De Certeau explains that the frontier “has a mediating role.... This actor, by virtue of the very fact that he is the mouthpiece of the limit, creates communication as well as separation; more than that, he establishes a border only by saying what crosses it, having come from the other side” (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall [Berkeley, 1984], 127).
 - 2 Janine Barchas recounts in painstaking detail the shifting fate of the Ralph Allen legacy during the 1790s, and how John Thorpe’s clumsy attempts to discern Catherine’s dowry tie in with their excursions past actual parts of the historical Allen estate of Prior Park (*Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location and Celebrity* [Baltimore, 2012], 57–92). Barchas’s retracing of the precise route of Thorpe’s ill-fated excursion with Catherine to Blaize Castle (Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 80–84) is made possible by Austen’s careful inclusion of specific street names and landmarks. Such precision stands in sharp contrast to confusion at the center of the novel in relationships and intentions caused by the collision of individuals from different parts of England.

perhaps unwittingly gestures towards this state of affairs when she protests that unlike in marriage, in dancing people “only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour” (74). As the events of the novel bear out, Catherine’s characterization here of the country dance—defined by physical closeness during a set space of time with no guarantee of meaningful familiarity—could serve as a negative model for the kinds of social interactions generally facilitated by a city like Bath. The uncertainty lurking in this conversation over what neighbors are, and whether they can be said to exist in Bath, comes into clear focus in the coming pages. After her first night dancing with Henry Tilney, Catherine does not see him for a number of evenings afterward and is thwarted in her attempts to discover his location.

The solution to such a problem would have been the Bath institution of the so-called “pump-room book,” a visitor registry maintained at the town’s central gathering place in which arrivals wrote down their names and places of residence. Finding aids like the pump-room book were designed to textualize space, not only allowing the master of ceremonies to call attention to prominent visitors but also promising to orient the newly arrived visitor herself within the social order constantly being reconstituted. To this extent, such registries were intended to work toward the creation of what Henri Lefebvre calls a “code of space”:

even if there is no general code of space, inherent to language or to all languages, there may have existed specific codes, established at specific historical periods and varying in their effects. If so, interested “subjects,” as members of a particular society, would have acceded by this means at once to *their* space and to their status as “subjects” acting within that space and (in the broadest sense of the word) comprehending it.¹

In an unsettled environment like that of Bath, where social practice can seem perilously ad hoc and subject to manipulation, any such code aimed at facilitating the visitor’s “comprehension” of his or her surroundings, and by extension of the self, would assume heightened importance. Accordingly, Henry Tilney’s disappointing absence from the obvious Bath venues in the coming days drives Catherine back to the pump-room, but to no avail: “his name was not in the Pump-room book, and curiosity could do no more” (29).

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, 1991), 17.

Austen's narrator archly suggests that contemporary novelists would play up Henry's physical elusiveness as indicative of "a sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero" (29). The ethnographic details of *Northanger Abbey*, by contrast, remind us that Catherine's difficulties in this regard are not idiosyncratic to sentimental novels—they in fact are in keeping with the gradual deterioration throughout the later part of the eighteenth century of the protocols and procedures designed to police social interactions in Bath, a deterioration accompanied by the town's decline in reputation as its former exclusivity was giving way to that of a commoner clientele.¹ If we return to the *New Bath Guide* of 1798, we can see how King's notice reflects tension over this decline in requesting

that Ladies and Gentleman coming to town, give orders that their names and places of abode be entered into any of the Pump-Room books; and the Master of Ceremonies thus publicly requests the favour of such Ladies and Gentleman, to whom he has not the honour of being personally known, to offer him some favourable occasion of being presented to them, that he may be enabled to shew that attention, which is not more his duty than his inclination to observe.²

That such practices were not always employed is indicated by the very existence and reproduction of such a notice, and the maintenance of the pump-room book was imperiled: the regulations posted by Richard Tyson, MC for the New Assembly Rooms, and reprinted in the 1798 *New Bath Guide*, lament that "the late great extension of the city puts it out of the power of the Master of Ceremonies to be regularly informed of the several persons who arrive here," leading Tyson to, like King, "publicly request that they will, on their arrival, cause their names, with their places of abode, to be inserted in a book kept at the Pump-Room for that purpose."³ Bath *Guides* from the 1790s give one the impression of a locality straining to maintain decorum and monitor class-mixing amidst an ever-larger influx of visitors from an increasingly diverse cross-section of the public. Accordingly, regulations about proper dress (no spurs in the assembly rooms) and behavior (leave seats near the front for peeresses) are

1 R.S. Neale chronicles Bath's decline from a center for elite entertainment earlier in the eighteenth century to a town increasingly populated by widows and invalids by the early nineteenth century (*Bath 1680–1850: A Social History or A Valley of Pleasure, Yet a Sink of Iniquity* [London, 1981]).

2 *New Bath Guide*, 26.

3 *New Bath Guide*, 24–25.

posted repeatedly in the *Guides* from the closing decades of the century. Visual representations from this period provide another window onto the chaotic nature of Bath social life as the eighteenth century was coming to a close. A friend of satirist Thomas Rowlandson, John Nixon was an amateur Anglo-Irish artist whose representations of the pump-room convey the spatial jostling at work in ways I have tried to suggest[.]¹ ... In one of his watercolors of the pump-room interior, the statue of Bath's most famous MC, Richard "Beau" Nash, stands in its niche in the back wall, a reminder of the city's fading glory days. To the right is the station for distributing spa water for drinking, tended by a servant, and beyond that, a figure on the far right who appears to be signing his name into the pump-room book. At the far left, an invalid in a wheelchair watches a crowd gathered around a pair of fighting dogs. The atmosphere is unsettled and seemingly unregulated, qualities whose potential for disorder are distilled in Nixon's sardonic inclusion of the ill-managed aggression of the dog fight, which another dog in the front right appears eager to join.

When Henry finally reappears, he accompanies his formidable father, General Tilney. At this point, the machinery aimed at governing social interactions in Bath kicks back into operation: Catherine seeks out Henry to apologize for a misunderstanding, and goes to the pump-room "that she might inform herself of General Tilney's lodgings, for though she believed they were in Milsom-street, she was not certain of the house.... To Milsom-Street she was directed; and having made herself perfect in the number, hastened away with eager steps and a beating heart to pay her visit, explain her conduct, and be forgiven" (90). The fact that Henry on his own does not register in the pump-room book, but that his father upon arrival does, may speak to the differences in their social position; Henry as the clergyman second son is considerably lower in the social scale than his father, and being of "a very respectable family" does not necessarily earn one a designation on the Bath pegboard that places individuals where residence and rank intersect. No books from the pump-room appear to have survived, rendering their layout and organization unknown.² It is interesting to note, however, the care with which the Tilneys' house number, at least, seems to have been registered, since the habitually tentative Catherine is indeed "perfect" in her apprehension of it. Evidence as to how confident one could be when speaking of house numbers, for example, is mixed

1 "Nixon, John Colley (b. before 1759, d. 1818)," rev. Douglas Fordham, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online ed., Jan 2008.

2 The Bath Record Office, where presumably such materials might be housed, does not have pump-room books in its collections.

in this period. Austen's surviving correspondence from her sojourns in Bath cite house numbers for residences in Queen Square and Gay Street, but during her stay with her aunt and uncle when her parents were house-hunting in 1801, the address specifies only the street—the Paragon. Similarly, her January 1805 letters to Francis Austen regarding George Austen's sudden death in Bath only give as an address "Green Park Bgs."¹ Catherine Morland's experiences underscore the difficulties involved in seeing the layout of Bath's most striking Georgian spaces—Queen Square, the Kings Circus, and the Royal Crescent—as necessarily pointing to the broader applicability of an outlook based on the predictable certainties of Euclidean geometry.² In *Northanger Abbey*, the ongoing uneven relationship between the promise of spatial certainty—Catherine knows the Tilneys' (temporary) address—and social acceptance is immediately made clear when she is denied admittance to the house on the grounds that the family is not at home, only to see, minutes later, that they clearly are.

The shifting nature of Bath's temporary neighborhoods has more serious consequences later in the novel, when John Thorpe, hoping to secure Catherine's hand himself as well as to increase his own importance, exaggerates her wealth to Henry's father. The General encounters Thorpe by chance, "one night at the theatre." Observing Henry's attentions to Catherine, the General asks "if he knew more of her than her name"—in other words, he seeks orientation beyond the minimal guidance of aids like the pump-room book. Thorpe, "most happy to be on speaking terms with a man of the General's

- 1 Some copies of Georgian-era Bath Directories (not to be confused with the Bath *Guides*) are available at the Bath Central Library; these organize names alphabetically, then giving streets and house numbers for resident householders, though these would not include the many visitors staying in the city or passing through it. In addition, ledgers at the Bath Record Office for payment of the City Water Rate, from householders who had water piped into their homes, predictably did include house numbers. But the Bath City Rate books show rate payers by street, omitting house numbers, until 1812. After this point, for some rate payers, house numbers are listed; for many others, they are not. The dominant unit of space for collecting most rates in Bath was the parish, and then the street. With the advent of the Penny Post in 1840, the consistent use of house numbers for various official purposes became much more widespread.
- 2 Such details complicate Gillian Russell's assessment that Bath was "a built environment being dedicated to the concentrated social interaction of a particular community.... The city had an economy of scale which was impossible for London to replicate, lending an intimacy as well as an intensity to its significance as a melting pot for the British elite, gentry and middling orders" ("Sociability," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 176–91, 182).

importance, had been joyfully and proudly communicative" (254). He wrongly presents Catherine as the heiress to Mr. Allen, he exaggerates Allen's wealth, and he adds "twice as much for the grandeur of the moment, by doubling what he chose to think the amount of Mr. Morland's preferment, trebling his private fortune, bestowing a rich aunt, and sinking half the children" (254). Claudia Johnson states that "the central masculine activity in *Northanger Abbey* is measurement, a fiat-like fixing of boundaries—of mileage, of time, of money, and in Henry's case, of words."¹ The events of the novel allow us to trace Henry's own fixation on linguistic precision to his father, who relies on language to ascertain matters where quantitative certitude is crucial. Accordingly, on the basis of John Thorpe's intelligence, the avaricious General decides that Catherine is a suitable partner for Henry and invites her to his estate.

In terms of the spatial practices we see in evidence, *Northanger Abbey* is Bath's opposite; rather than a master of ceremonies, we have the General himself, whose tight control over spaces is closely allied to his control over individuals, including but not limited to Catherine herself. Unlike Bath, *Northanger* is a place defined from the outset where dancing does not happen, since the surrounding country lacks enough of the sort of guests the General would consider suitable, namely peeresses and young men of known property:

[The General] feared the sameness of every day's society and employments would disgust her with the place, wished the Lady Frasers had been in the country, talked every now and then of having a large party to dinner, and once or twice began even to calculate the number of young dancing people in the neighbourhood. But then it was such a dead time of year, no wild-fowl, no game, and the Lady Frasers were not in the country. (215)

As Catherine's suspicions about Mrs. Tilney's death show, the General's desire for control is to some extent a legacy of the Gothic romances Austen alludes to, replete as they are with prison-like spaces devoted to (often female) torment. But the General's proprietary, tyrannical attitude extends well beyond *Northanger Abbey*. When a situation concerning the neighborhood potentially complicates his

1 Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (Chicago, 1988), 38. Barchas adds to this notion through her discussion of possible links between Austen's John Thorpe, who seeks to measure Catherine's dowry, and Thomas Thorpe, a prominent eighteenth-century surveyor of Bath whose maps of the area were "a watershed moment in the history of Bath's topography" (75).

will to dominate, he eschews it, like the dancing party thwarted by his abortive attempts “to calculate” the number of eligible guests. More frequently, the narrator gives indications of how the General’s unchallenged power at Northanger radiates outward, settling over neighborhood spaces and, consequently, the people inhabiting them. During a tour of the Abbey grounds, he seeks to impress Catherine with his hot houses for growing tropical fruit, a very labor-intensive undertaking; to Catherine’s eyes, “a whole parish [seemed] to be at work within the inclosure” (182). He then makes a point of announcing that

I expect my surveyor from Brockham with his report in the morning; and afterwards I cannot in decency fail attending the club. I really could not face my acquaintance if I staid away now; for, as I am known to be in the country, it would be taken exceedingly amiss; and it is a rule with me, Miss Morland, never to give offence to any of my neighbours, if a small sacrifice of time and attention can prevent it. They are a set of very worthy men. They have half a buck from Northanger twice a year; and I dine with them whenever I can. (216)

General Tilney performs masculine rituals of sociability via visits to his club and gifts of game that his property ownership entitles him to hunt and whose transfer reinforces his status as local leader.¹

At the same time, the General references his surveyor, whose job would be all about reducing spaces—perhaps including those of his “neighbours”—to what can be calculated and classified as Tilney’s own. While reliable maps were scarce in the years before the Ordnance Survey, large landholders were predictably intent on ascertaining the exact boundaries of their own lands through precise estate maps. At the same time, it was quite rare for any landowner to retain a surveyor on an ongoing basis, and the General’s apparent decision to do so underscores the connection between his hunger for spatial and for social control.² An undercurrent of tension also

1 The editors of the Cambridge edition of the novel observe, “it was usual for landowners to share some of their produce with their less well endowed neighbours—in this instance townspeople, who would not have access to the land required to raise deer” (349n).

2 Regina Hewitt, *Map of a Nation: A Biography of the Ordnance Survey* (London, 2010), 96. Hewitt explains that it was “extremely unusual” for landowners to retain private surveyors in the eighteenth century in the context of her discussion about Charles Lennox, 3rd Duke of Richmond. One of the few landowners who did employ a full-time surveyor, Lennox is an instructive example to consider alongside General Tilney. In Lennox’s [continued]

runs through the General's plan, announced immediately afterward, to have Henry host them all for a visit to his parsonage at Woodston, some 20 miles distant from Northanger. On one hand, it is certainly in Henry's interest as Catherine's suitor to have her see, and approve of, his home. But the General's attitude toward the expedition is predictably heavy handed and a source of detectable anxiety to Henry. Soon after this announcement, Henry leaves early for Woodston to prepare—much earlier, in Catherine's view, than would reasonably be necessary. With typical flippancy, Henry makes a joke of the situation, saying he goes to frighten “my old housekeeper out of her wits,—because I must go and prepare a dinner for you” (217). For all his father's injunction that “whatever you may happen to have in the house will be enough” (216), Henry clearly understands that he is to provide the same kind of meal that the exacting General would expect at his own home. The relief on Henry's part can be inferred when the event goes off well four days later, though even given his preparations, the suggestion remains that everything is not quite up to the General's standards: Catherine “could not but observe that the abundance of the dinner did not seem to create the smallest astonishment in the General; nay, that he was even looking at the side-table for cold meat which was not there” (221).

But if measurement is a male activity in the novel, one of Catherine's signal traits is her “unaccountable character” (6), and the exact nature of her dowry is unclear even to her and not resolved definitively until the novel's closing pages, which divulges the solid number of £3,000.¹ Similarly, Catherine's surname may signal the notion that her identity exceeds reduction to quantifiable entities like real estate: she is worth “more” than mere “land.” The problem with the General's measurement of Catherine's fortune is that it depends on chance encounters in Bath's extremely porous neighborhoods, not on the precision of his Gloucestershire surveyor.

case, this practice was tied to his purposeful accumulation during the later eighteenth century of numerous properties in the neighborhood of Goodwood, his Sussex estate. Hewitt explains, “Originally 1100 acres, Goodwood gobbled up its neighbours.... Soon the estate was almost seventeen times its initial size” (95–96). Richmond would go on to become Master-General of the Board of Ordnance, and successfully champion the official creation of the Ordnance Survey.

- 1 Susan Zlotnick insightfully juxtaposes Catherine's vagueness on monetary matters with the acuity demonstrated by Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney, for whom a focus on economics is equally unhelpful, albeit in very different ways (“From Involuntary Object to Voluntary Spy: Female Agency, Novels and the Marketplace in *Northanger Abbey*,” *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 [Fall 2009]: 277–92).

John Thorpe, Tilney's Bath "source," seems a man with whom the General would not have associated in his own district.¹ And John Thorpe's own short-lived, one-sided courtship of Catherine is itself a product of an accidental Bath encounter early in the novel, when the first person the Allens recognize happens to be Mrs. Thorpe, a childhood schoolfellow of Mrs. Allen's of whom, however, she "had been contented to know nothing ... for the last fifteen years" (24). With such chance encounters as the basis of social intelligence, all calculations go out the window. When the General later rules Catherine out as a possible daughter-in-law, it is upon similarly flawed intelligence, this time about her supposed poverty. Again the source is John Thorpe, and again the information is gathered outside of the Tilneys' proper domain (this time in London): "that they [these expectations] were false, the General had learnt from the very person who had suggested them, from Thorpe himself, whom he had chanced to meet again in town" (255). Believing himself deliberately deceived by Catherine, the General returns to the Abbey and summarily and disgracefully evicts her, sending her on the long journey home with no accompanying servant via the impersonal conveyance of a post-chaise.

Northanger Abbey ties uncertainty over identity and status to the spatial and social disorientation of England's towns—places whose sizable transient populations and geographic expansion rendered the very concept of neighborhood unstable to the point of irrelevancy. To some extent, this instability seems to fade in *Persuasion* (1818), Austen's other novel set partly in Bath and published posthumously with *Northanger Abbey*. In *Persuasion*, Austen rather straightforwardly invokes Bath's geographical codes; Sir Walter and Elizabeth's house on the heights of Camden Place telegraphs status as well as elevation, while Mrs. Smith, the poor widow in Westgate Buildings, is "at the actual and symbolic low end of Bath."² Yet ambiguity persists, since certainty as to names and addresses can mask far more significant

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- 1 Back in Bath, John Thorpe tells Catherine he is familiar with the General from visits to London: "I have met him for ever at the Bedford" (95), a well-known coffee house. But given Thorpe's general tendency toward exaggeration and deception, this seems unlikely, particularly when he goes on to ground this claim in a preposterous story about beating the general at billiards with "one of the cleanest strokes that perhaps ever was made in this world" (95). He concludes by admitting he has never dined with General Tilney, though he very much wants to, and as the reader later learns, Tilney is particularly dedicated to dining with those he considers his true neighbors, men in the local club near Northanger.
 - 2 Jocelyn Harris, *A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression: Jane Austen's Persuasion* (Newark, Del., 2007), 166.

opacity as to motives and intentions. As David Simpson remarks, “Austen’s destructive and dangerous characters are commonly the strangers, the ones who come from outside the locality ... but she is also prone to suggest the limitations of the traditionally embedded ‘roast beef of old England’ set.”¹ In the unsettled environs of Bath, everyone is a potential stranger, including the heir to the heroine’s ancestral estate, William Walter Elliot, whose reasons for seeking out the companionship of Anne Elliot remain in question until the novel’s final chapters. In *Northanger Abbey*, the company of strangers is productive as well as perilous. If Catherine Morland’s Bath sojourn makes her vulnerable to “report” that is not easily verified or disproved, it also throws Henry Tilney into her path. Further, their growing intimacy would not have been sanctioned by General Tilney had he not believed John Thorpe’s deliberate exaggeration of Catherine’s fortune. And the General’s dishonorable eviction of Catherine—on mistaken information garnered in another urban center, London—fuels Henry’s determination in the end not to give her up. The novel’s predictable conclusion leaves unresolved the various difficulties associated with life in either Bath or the country. In terms of the novel’s wider social spaces, we are left with two problematic alternatives going forward: the unstable spa town, source of misunderstandings but also opportunities, and the countryside realm of the tyrannical patriarch, backed by the consolidating logic of enclosure and surveying that seeks to foreclose rival claims to economic and social standing.

(2015)

1 David Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger* (Chicago, 2013), 80.