"SURPRISED AND NOT SURPRISED:" VARIETIES OF ASTONISHMENT IN AUSTEN'S NOVELS

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Abstract: This article explores the ways in which Jane Austen repurposed the eighteenth-century idiom of surprise and shock. Aside from a few scandalous revelations that hark back to eighteenth-century narrative données, Austen's novels are not designed to deliver major surprises to the reader, and none of their heroines is subject to the kind of physical assaults visited upon Pamela and Evelina. Nevertheless, Austen's characters frequently express feelings of surprise and shock: such statements typically serve more as vehicles of moral or social judgment than as spontaneous responses to the sudden. Rather than narrating surprising events, Austen is interested in what might be called the sociolinguistics of surprise. The article concludes with a consideration of Austen's poetics of shock. In her early novel *Northanger Abbey*, Austen mimicked the obvious jump-scares of Gothic novels; this article shows how she went on to borrow from their perceptual and affective syntax in her later novels.

Keywords: surprise, shock, emotion, Gothic, narrative, poetics, trauma

In terms of etymology, both surprise and shock have violence in their past. "Surprise," derived from the Old French *surprendre*, originally denoted a military attack; "shock" referred to a violent encounter with an enemy. These words took different lexical paths in later usage, which can be tracked in Samuel Johnson's 1755 Dictionary. Johnson offers three senses of surprise ("to take unawares," "to astonish by something wonderful," "to confuse or perplex by something sudden") and more narrowly defines the verb shock as "to shake by violence" and "to offend; to disgust."[1] In the emerging eighteenth-century discourse of aesthetics, surprise

[1] *Johnson's Dictionary Online*, "surprise" and "offend," accessed 16 June 2025, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/.

came to denote the pleasure of novelty;[2] it was not until the advent of modernist aesthetics that shock would be valorized as an emotional component of the new and challenging.

Both surprise and shock could be said to drive the narrative pulse of eighteenth-century fiction, but surprise is far more frequently invoked, for it is more versatile in its range of inflections – denoting both distress and pleasure, physical attack and internal reflection, spontaneous reaction and retrospective judgment. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), for instance, there are plenty of incidents that a reader might find shocking, but the letter-writing protagonist more typically describes her experience in terms of surprise, which carries both cognitive and brutely physical meanings. To speak of herself as surprised is not only to describe the unexpected; it is to raise the spectre of rape or reputational ruin at the hands of her employer, Mr. B. In the second half of the novel, when Pamela becomes Mr. B's fiancée rather than victim, she unwittingly describes the transformation of her earlier surprises into a form of aesthetic pleasure, remarking that her travails would amount to "a surprizing kind of Novel."[3] She does not say "a shocking kind of novel," for such phrasing would more frankly acknowledge the sexual menace that Richardson seeks to contain and Pamela wishes to forget; it would say the quiet part out loud.

In a few exemplary novels from later in the century, there is a notable rise in the frequency of "shock," as indicated in the table below:

	Uses of "surprise"	**Uses of "shock"**	**Ratio (approx.)**
Pamela (1740)	43	10	4:1
Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (1748)	32	12	3:1
Tom Jones (1749)	158	48	3:1
The Castle of Otranto (1764)	9	8	1:1
Evelina (1778)	109	52	2:1
The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794)	103	61	2:1

2 In Addison's formulation of novelty, "Every thing that is *new* or *uncommon* raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which is was not before possesst." Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* (no. 412, 23 June 1712), ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 3:541.

3 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 246.

	Uses of "surprise"	Uses of "shock"	Ratio (approx.)
Austen:			
Northanger Abbey	39	11	3:1
Sense and Sensibility	67	21	3:1
Pride and Prejudice	77	16	4:1
Mansfield Park	62	16	4:1
Emma	74	20	4:1
Persuasion	37	10	4:1

Table 1: Ratios of "Surprise" to "Shock" in 18th-Century Novels and Austen's

Not surprisingly, Ann Radcliffe's Gothic romance, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), features a high incidence of "shock" and its variants; but so, too, does Frances Burney's novel of manners, *Evelina* (1778), which focuses on a provincial naif's exposure to the urban shocks of London. A selective inventory of what is said to shock Evelina, sometimes to the brink of fainting, would include a physical altercation between Evelina's French grandmother and the boorish Captain Mirvan; a sudden encounter with a man who appears to be on the verge of ending his life with a pistol; and a bewildering run-in with prostitutes in the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. The ascendancy of "shock" in eighteenth-century fiction might be attributed in part to an attenuation of "surprise." With the sheer ubiquity of surprise, a more powerful complementary term might be necessary to indicate the extremity of a character's experience. That lexical distinction is registered in a scene in Henry Mackenzie's novel, *The Man of Feeling* (1771), in which the protagonist Harley takes a tour of Bedlam. As a man of compassionate sensibility, he finds the spectacle of mental illness "inexpressibly shocking," both for the abject misery he witnesses and for the "inhuman practice" of treating that misery as just another London "show" for the "idle visitant." The jaded guide, on the other hand, has become numb to human suffering, and he is "surprised" at the squeamish reaction of his guests.[4] Isn't this what they paid to see?

In this article I want to explore a few notable ways in which Jane Austen repurposed the eighteenth-century idiom of surprise and shock. Many of her novels feature shocking revelations that hark back to eighteenth-century narrative données – a heartless seduction, an elopement, an adulterous affair, a widowed

[4] Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 30.

suitor's mercenary past – but aside from such isolated scandals, they are not typically designed to deliver major surprises to the reader. (In *Emma*, the narrative withholding of the secret engagement between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax stands out as a rare instance of authorial subterfuge.) And none of her heroines is subject to the kind of physical assaults visited upon Pamela and Evelina. On the other hand, Austen's characters frequently express feelings of surprise and shock, and as I will show, such statements typically serve more as vehicles of moral or social judgment than as spontaneous responses to the sudden.

More than narrating surprising events, Austen is interested in what might be called the sociolinguistics of surprise. This is not to say, however, that she entirely abandoned the poetics of shock: the representation of her characters' genuine, embodied responses to the sudden or surprising. In an earlier study, I argued that Austen's early novel *Northanger Abbey* not only parodied the obvious shock-effects of Gothic fiction but also borrowed their perceptual and affective syntax in subtler ways.[5] Here, I extend that premise to consider key moments of shock in her later novels.

The Sociolinguistics of Surprise

In the taxonomy of modern psychology, surprise is commonly identified as a "primary" emotion rooted in immediate responses to stimuli, as opposed to "secondary" or socially conditioned emotions such as embarrassment, guilt, or pride.[6] But in Austen's affective vocabulary, expressions of surprise often blur that distinction: rather than merely conveying a reaction to the unexpected, they register a judgment of the undesired, or a confrontation with the repressed. Austen's attention to the nuances of that response is epitomized in *Sense and Sensibility*, when Elinor Dashwood's mother reveals that the stolid Colonel Brandon is in love with her sister Marianne. In this moment, Elinor is described as "feeling by turns both pleased and pained, surprised and not surprised."[7] The attention that Colonel Brandon has paid to Marianne should not come as startling news, but Elinor's reaction represents a peculiar species of surprise, one that springs not from the wholly unexpected but from the willfully overlooked. Elinor

5 See my chapter on Austen in *Surprise: The Poetics of the Unexpected from Milton to Austen* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 141-70.

6 See Silvan Tompkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 107; and Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 50.

7 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 255. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

is *pleased* because she personally approves of the colonel, but she is sympathetically *pained* on behalf of her sister's romantic preferences. Though she does not fully approve of Marianne's affection for Willoughby, she imaginatively participates in her sister's fantasy enough to feel the shock of a divergence from it. It is one thing to suspect the Colonel's romantic interest, it is another to be confronted with its sheer facticity.

In such moments, Austen conveys a character's genuine feeling of surprise while implicitly raising a question about its cause or context. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the episode of Marianne Dashwood's minor injury from a fall exemplifies that bifocal attention. After two days of confinement during inclement weather, Marianne ventures out for a walk, only to be "chagrined and surprised" when she is caught in a downpour and sprains her ankle in a tumble down a slippery hill (32). *Should* she have been surprised? Just before the ill-fated outing, Austen describes the typically British meteorological conditions with exquisite ambiguity as "the partial sunshine of a showery sky" (31). That tipping point provides one among many ways that the novel differentiates between the Dashwood sisters: while Marianne places her hope in the partial sunshine, Eleanor heeds the showery sky, staying indoors to work on her drawings. In essence, Austen respects the emotional reality of Marianne's surprise while implying that some things should not come as a total surprise.

Throughout Austen's novels, expressions of surprise often function as a lever of ethical or social judgment. There are examples of this reaction too numerous to list here, but I would like to focus on a few cases in which one character's surprise becomes contested and an implicit judgment is laid bare. In such cases, the operative question is: "Why should you be surprised?" In *Pride and Prejudice*, after flatly rejecting Mr. Collins's marriage proposal, Elizabeth Bennet is astonished to find that her erstwhile suitor has quickly moved on to find a willing mate in her friend Charlotte Lucas. But Charlotte challenges her friend's dismay: "Why should you be surprised, my dear Eliza?" The question exposes Elizabeth's idealistic assumptions about finding a life partner, in contrast to Charlotte's pragmatic calculation of her chances on the marriage market. As Charlotte flatly puts it, "I am not romantic, you know; I never was."[8] That declaration of temperament masks a deeper truth about age: at twenty-seven, Charlotte cannot afford to be romantic, but Elizabeth at twenty still holds out hope for better prospects. The unsentimental speed with which Collins redirects his course might come as a shock, but Austen implies that Charlotte's acceptance of the proposal should not be a total surprise.

[8] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

In *Mansfield Park* in particular, there is a striking number of instances in which one character challenges another character's profession of surprise. In these cases, the contested point turns on issues of expected behaviour. Lady Bertram brings news that she thinks will surprise her husband Sir Thomas – that Mrs. Grant has invited their poor relation Fanny Price to dinner. Edmund insists that it is "very natural" that Mrs. Grant should invite "so agreeable a visitor," and Sir Thomas concludes: "The only surprize I can feel is, that this should be the *first* time of its being paid."[9] Edmund objects to his brother Tom's enthusiasm for putting on a play called "Lovers' Vows" while their father is away in the West Indies, and Tom retorts: "What is there to surprise you in it?" (99) For Tom, there is nothing surprising about the rather racy play or the staging of it; but for Edmund the future clergyman, it is a risky transgression. Tom's defiant question exposes a fundamental rift in the brother's assumptions about decorum and family responsibility. In a different context, Edmund raises the same challenge when Mary Crawford expresses dismay at his decision to take orders in the Church: "Why should it surprise you?" (72) Why indeed? Mary cannot be speaking from any deep knowledge of Edmund's character or talents, because she barely knows him. In essence, Mary's expressed surprise serves as a proxy for her disapproval, as well as a register of her disappointment – for she is genuinely attracted to Edmund but would prefer to be married to a man destined for a more exalted position in the world.

The decision that causes universal surprise in *Mansfield Park* is Fanny Price's rejection of Henry Crawford's marriage proposal – for her Bertram relatives insist that Fanny should be grateful for such an opportunity for social advancement. Indeed, Sir Thomas is stunned into several minutes of silence by Fanny's steadfast refusal. He insists that Fanny should have read the signs of his intentions and been prepared to say yes: "This cannot have taken you by surprise." (247) To the contrary, Fanny insists to her cousin Edmund that she was genuinely astonished by Henry's declaration: "He took me wholly by surprise. I had not an idea that his behavior to me before had any meaning; and surely I was not to be teaching myself to like him only because he was taking, what seemed, very idle notice of me." (277) If Fanny is indeed surprised by Henry's proposal, it may be that she is simply naive about the semiotics of courtship, but it is more likely that she has repressed the obvious; she did not want his attentions to mean what everyone else took them to mean. Aside from judging Henry to be an unserious flirt, Fanny resists his attention because she secretly loves her cousin Edmund, and only the reader has access to that feeling.

[9] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 171. I have retained the variable spelling of "surprise"/"surprize" in this edition. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

Professions of shock in Austen's novels deserve to be considered as a separate category from surprise, for their hyperbolic tendencies make them even more ripe for scrutiny. One of the best-known iterations of the "shocking" in Austen's fiction appears in a scene in *Northanger Abbey*. It turns on a confusion over the valence of that word – the difference between a real disturbance and an aestheticized sensation. In a conversation with her new friends Henry Tilney and his sister Eleanor, the heroine Catherine Morland declares, "I have heard that something very shocking indeed will soon come out of London."[10] That statement alarms Eleanor, who assumes that Catherine is alluding to some kind of political unrest or violent uprising. But Henry intervenes to clarify that Catherine is merely referring to the anticipated publication of an unnamed novel. The momentary confusion represents, in microcosm, Catherine's conflation of Gothic fantasy with more pedestrian reality. But how, we might wonder, could Henry be so clairvoyant as to know which shocking thing Catherine is talking about? I would answer this question in two ways. First, Henry has already surprised Catherine by declaring that he has read the complete works of Radcliffe, upending her assumption that "young men despised novels amazingly" (78). Henry's correct guess is therefore based on a shared literary enthusiasm, but it is also informed by the gendered presumption that a young woman cannot possibly know anything about current events. In the course of this scene, Henry has been mansplaining the aesthetic principles of the picturesque before moving on to the less pleasant topic of enclosure laws; and, as the narrator puts it, "he shortly found himself arrived at politics, and from politics it was an easy step to silence." (81) Within that awkward pause, Catherine's motivation for bringing up the "shocking" thing is to contribute to an otherwise one-sided conversation. It is also possible that she has picked up this word from her other new friend Isabella Thorpe, who is given to describing a variety of perfectly mundane things as shocking.

So prevalent is the idiom of shock in *Northanger Abbey* that it seeps into the narrator's language. While Catherine is touring the grounds of the Abbey with Eleanor Tilney, they enter a romantically gloomy grove of fir trees, while General Tilney parts company with them. Catherine is "shocked to find how much her spirits were relieved by the separation," but the narrator quickly revises that characterization: "The shock however being less real than the relief, offered it no injury; and she began to talk with easy gaiety of the delightful melancholy which such a grove inspired." (131) To say that the shock was less "real" is to suggest

[10] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 81. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

that it was merely a rhetorical device, something that Catherine herself might have said if she were narrating her own thoughts. The narrator could have simply reported that *Catherine was relieved*; but Austen prefers to foreground a self-correction, a more precise calibration of the character's feelings. What Catherine truly experiences, then, is not shock but the "delightful melancholy" of the grove – the pleasantly aesthetic vibe of the Gothic without the requisite horror or astonishment.

The instances of shock in *Northanger Abbey* can be largely attributed to that novel's playful engagement with the conventions of Gothic romance, but Austen pays similar attention to the idiom of the "shocking" – its uses and abuses – throughout her later novels. In general, far more female characters than male characters use this idiom. And like Catherine Morland's remark about "something shocking" coming out of London, many professions of shock function as a dash of conversational seasoning, verbal spice to the dull or unremarkable. For instance, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Palmer describes the prospect of bad weather interfering with her plans as "a very shocking thing" (83). And she explains that her husband "cannot bear" to write letters because "he says it is quite shocking." That comment draws an immediate rebuke from Mr. Palmer: "Don't palm your abuses of language on me." (86) He does have a point: surely that word never passed his lips, and Mrs. Palmer is indeed abusing its meaning. And yet Mrs. Palmer might be forgiven for that verbal license: in a conspicuously unhappy marriage, the irascible Mr. Palmer barely says anything at all, and in that vacuum, her speech patterns can be understood as a form of overcompensation.

Austen similarly scrutinizes the colloquial hyperbole of the shocking in *Emma*. Early in the novel, the heroine's elderly father remarks that George Knightley must have experienced a "shocking walk" by traveling a mile to Hartfield on foot. Knightley is far too polite to accuse Mr. Woodhouse of abusing the English language; instead, he demurs that he has merely enjoyed "a beautiful moonlight night."[11] What is said to be shocking reflects the hypochondriacal sensitivities of the elderly speaker. In allegorical miniature, Austen contrasts the excitable protectiveness of Emma's father with the cheerful hardiness of her future husband. Indeed, at the end of the novel, the news of Emma's engagement to Knightley is said to come as a "considerable shock" to him – one that can be amended only by Emma and Knightley moving in with him after their marriage (366).

Professions of shock often carry a sharp social judgment. When Mr. Elton's new wife declares herself to be "a little shocked" (227) at a house's lack of two drawing rooms, she is boasting of her own assumptions about luxury in contrast

[11] Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

with the putatively lower standards of Highbury. At the end of the novel, when Mrs. Elton learns that Knightley intends to move in with Emma and her father after the wedding, it is no surprise that she calls it a "shocking plan" (369). As the word "shocking" circulates through the conversational discourse of the novel, it takes on different inflections. The endlessly talkative Miss Bates is very fond of the word – but she does not use it in the same judgmental way. In one scene, she relates a characteristically long-winded story about receiving a gift of apples from Knightley's estate. She begins her anecdote by reporting that she was "really quite shocked" by the delivery and "excessively shocked indeed" to find out that Knightley's own store of apples was nearly depleted (187). Soon after, she gets to express her gratitude to Knightley himself, and within just a few sentences, she says three times that she was "so shocked" to be the recipient of such generosity (193). There are two ways to understand Miss Bates's idiom of shock. First, the word functions as a kind of conversational enhancement to truly dull matters, in inverse proportion to the provincial tenor of an unmarried, middle-aged woman's life in the sleepy village of Highbury. On a deeper level, it registers a self-consciousness about being the needy recipient of charity: to say that she is shocked to receive the last of Mr. Knightley's apple harvest is not to say that the gift is totally unexpected; rather, it registers an unarticulated feeling of discomfort about her reliance on such simple gifts.

As I have noted, far more female characters in Austen's fiction than male characters pronounce things to be "shocking" or are said to be shocked outright, just as female characters are more vulnerable to various forms of surprise and more willing to admit surprise. We can see that difference at work in a famous scene in *Emma*. During a picnic gathering on Box Hill, Emma thoughtlessly mocks Miss Bates for being both overly talkative and extremely dull. Emma herself does not realize the offense she has caused until Knightley chastises her for it. This is a major turning point in the novel, for it forces Emma to reckon with her own flaws and to realize how deeply she values Knightley's regard. She is still ruminating over the event five chapters later, and in a passage of free indirect discourse, she recalls, with chagrin, how "shocked" Knightley was by her behaviour (326). This may be an accurate summary of Knightley's feeling in the moment, but it does not report what he actually says. The distinction is important, because Knightley does not express his own feelings; he asks Emma how she could be "so unfeeling to Miss Bates" and insists that Miss Bates "felt your full meaning" (294). It is possible that Emma's bad behaviour has come as an unwelcome confirmation of something Knightley has observed in her character. In this way, Knightley might be said to be both surprised and not surprised by what he has witnessed.

The Mimetic Vocabulary of Gothic Shock

The opening scene of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), in which the evil usurper Prince Manfred discovers that his son has been fatally crushed under the weight of a gigantic helmet, exemplifies much of what I would call the DNA of Gothic perceptual narration: sudden sounds, agitated punctuation (dashes and exclamation points), immobilized spectators, an extended lacuna of speechlessness (often said to last a minute or more), delayed or gradual recognition of a shocking reality. We can see Austen conspicuously playing with these elements in a well-known scene in *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine Morland is staying as a guest of the Tilney family at the abbey, and finds herself trying to open a chest in her bedroom – with the expectation that it must surely hide a secret manuscript. Of course it contains nothing of the sort, and Catherine experiences two jolts of the ordinary: a sudden knock at the door turns out to be merely a servant; and the opened chest merely reveals a white cotton counterpane.

Many years before she wrote *Northanger Abbey*, Austen was parodying (and learning from) the shock-effects of Gothic fiction. In *Love and Freindship*, the epistolary novella that she wrote when she was fourteen, the plot is packed with amazing coincidences, and her highly sensitive characters are constantly vulnerable to surprise-induced fainting spells. Early in the story, the narrator Laura describes her astonishment at hearing "a violent knocking" at her family's cottage door and her utter puzzlement over what it might signify.[12] Rather than being heard as an ordinary domestic occurrence, the knock becomes an uncanny event subject to an absurdly long dialogue about its cause. Once the door is finally opened, Laura pronounces the visitor to be "the most beautiful and amiable Youth, I had ever beheld."[13] There is a comic disproportion in narrative pacing here: Laura falls in love with the young man much faster than it takes to answer the door to him.

Parody aside, Austen continued to write variations on the trope of the shocking doorway entrance in her later novels. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are staying in London when Colonel Brandon pays an unexpected visit, announced by a loud rap at the door. Here, the surprise is not the knock itself but rather its source. Marianne has been keeping an anxious vigil near the door, every moment expecting a knock to announce the arrival of her beloved Willoughby. The subversion of that expectation is described as "too great

[12] Jane Austen, "Love and Freindship," in *Catharine and Other Writings*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 78.

[13] Austen, "Love and Freindship," 78.

a shock to be borne with calmness" (120). Colonel Brandon's visit is thus akin to Catherine's discovery of the white cotton counterpane – a disappointing diversion from a more exciting romantic script. The physical effect of Marianne's shock is so alarming that Colonel Brandon asks if she has taken ill. In a larger social context, this scene reflects the predicament of a young unmarried woman in want of a husband – the tedium and anxiety of waiting for a pleasant surprise: for the desired suitor to answer her letters, to pay a visit, to declare himself.

In *Mansfield Park*, it is the sudden arrival of the master of the house that causes a shock, and Austen narrates the event with all the flair of Walpole or Radcliffe. While Sir Thomas Bertram is away at the family sugar plantation in Antigua, the younger members of the Bertram family and a few friends have decided to put on an amateur play, but the patriarch's unanticipated return puts an end to that – delivering the kind of horrifying jolt more typical of Gothic fiction. In the midst of their rehearsal, "the door of the room was thrown open, and Julia appearing at it, with a face all aghast, exclaimed, 'My father is come! He is in the hall at this moment.'" (135) Several elements of Gothic narrative can be recognized in this scene: the sudden aural intrusion; the affective attention to stricken faces; the flurry of exclamations; the free indirect presentation of communal shock; the period of speechlessness; the vocabulary of horror and consternation. Perhaps most striking of all is Austen's variation on Gothic suspense at the level of form: the narration of the event straddles the textual lacuna between Volume 1 and Volume 2. As Nicholas Dames has observed, chapter divisions in novels typically have the effect of "prying linear time apart, making it conspicuous and particular."[14] Austen usually divides her chapters in increments of a day or phases of a day, but here she heightens the drama of the pause by dividing two volumes across the interval of a stunned minute. Similar to the way that Thomas De Quincey characterized the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*, the shock of Sir Thomas's arrival precipitates the amateur actors' collective feeling of transgression, of enjoying various forms of liberty while the master was away. (On the subject of guilty feelings, Sir Thomas himself is not immune to stunned speechlessness: in a subsequent conversation, Fanny's innocent inquiry to him about the slave trade is met with "dead silence;" 155.)

My next example of Austen's quasi-Gothic surprise comes from *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel that features what is surely the most unflappable heroine in all of Austen's fiction, Elizabeth Bennet. Early on in the novel, she claims a certain emotional immunity when she says to her elder sister Jane, "Compliments always

[14] Nicholas Dames, *The Chapter: A Segmented History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 7.

take *you* by surprise, and *me* never." (9) It is not as if nothing ever surprises her, but for a young woman in Austen's world, she possesses an amazing ability to surprise other people. After Jane takes ill during her visit to the Bingleys, Elizabeth walks several miles to check on her, and her spontaneous arrival causes "a great deal of surprise" (24). When Darcy asks if she has any inclination to dance a reel, she refuses to respond, causing him to repeat the question "with some surprise at her silence" but also feeling "bewitched" by it (38). Elizabeth's crowning moment of surprising other people comes toward the end of the novel, when she rebuffs Lady Catherine De Bourgh's demand that she promise not to marry Darcy. Lady Catherine declares herself to be "shocked and astonished," and what might sound like blustery redundancy accurately conveys the reaction: the shock registers her aristocratic outrage over Elizabeth's insubordination; the astonishment reflects the discovery that such a creature as Elizabeth Bennet exists in the world.

In one pivotal scene, however, Elizabeth finally succumbs to surprise, in a way that recalls the tropes of Gothic fiction. Traveling with her aunt and uncle, the Gardiners, she takes the liberty of visiting Darcy's Pemberley estate while the master of the house is presumed to be away. On this unauthorized tour, Elizabeth feels "increasing astonishment" at hearing the housekeeper praise Darcy's sweet temper and generosity. The feeling continues as she walks through a picture gallery where she stops before a portrait of a smiling Darcy that is said to "arrest" her for "several minutes," as she "fix[es] his eyes upon herself" (188, 189). Austen's peculiar phrasing registers both Elizabeth's agency as the gazer and her uncanny sense of being gazed upon. The moment recapitulates the scene of Elizabeth's first encounter with Darcy, when she observed "how frequently Mr. Darcy's eyes were fixed on her" (38). In that scene, Darcy specifically notices her eyes; and in the face of Caroline Bingley's jealous teasing, he insists that a portraitist would have difficulty capturing their lively expressiveness. At Pemberley, it is Elizabeth's turn to gaze at Darcy, or at least his painted likeness.

Elizabeth's attraction to the strangely life-like portrait also reflects a psychological truth about her relationship with Darcy: each has a vital presence in the other's imagination. Moreover, the artistic illusion of Darcy's gaze registers a furtive thrill of transgression. Elizabeth enjoys the luxury to look upon Darcy's portrait for longer than would be socially permissible in real life. The moment represents, in microcosm, the liberty she has taken in touring Pemberley when the master is not at home. Finally, the impression of life-like portraiture is proleptic: after leaving the house, Elizabeth runs into Darcy himself on the grounds of Pemberley. Here, Austen plays a witty variation on the Gothic trope of the portrait come to life – originated in *The Castle of Otranto*, when the painted image of Manfred's grandfather Don Ricardo morphs into a spectre leading him down a dark passageway.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen alludes to the trope of the haunted portrait when Henry Tilney teases Catherine about how her love of Gothic fiction might condition her to expect certain things during her stay at the abbey: "over the fireplace the portrait of some handsome warrior, whose features will so incomprehensibly strike you, that you will not be able to withdraw your eyes from it." (115)

Several things are striking about the face-to-face encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy at Pemberley. It is typical of their relationship that each is surprised by the other; and both manifest that putatively feminine facial signifier, the blush. Moreover, Austen doubles the surprise of the encounter by having Elizabeth run into Darcy on the grounds a *second* time. Her "astonishment" is said to equal that of the first meeting, but this time she is more "prepared" to match Darcy's civility (192). In this second meeting, Darcy is formally introduced to the Gardiners, and Elizabeth fears his reaction: "'What will be his surprise,' thought she, 'when he knows who they are! He takes them now for people of fashion.'" (193) That suspicion is confirmed for her a few sentences later: "That he was *surprised* by the connexion was evident; he sustained it however with fortitude, and so far from going away, turned back with them, and entered into conversation with Mr. Gardiner." (193) This is not an objective statement of Darcy's reaction, however; it is Elizabeth's presumption of Darcy's snobbishness upon finding that she is related to a mere London tradesman and his wife. In truth, the surprise is all on the side of the Gardiners. Regarding Darcy's warm reception, Mr. Gardiner says, "I was never more surprised than by his behavior to us. It was more than civil." (195)

Like many other things in *Pride and Prejudice*, then, the nature of surprise itself is re-evaluated. In many instances in Austen's fiction, expressions of surprise function as forms of disapproval; but in this case, Darcy's putative surprise about the Gardiners turns out to be a figment of Elizabeth's imagination. When Elizabeth and Darcy later compare notes on their unexpected encounter, they both use the same key word to articulate their feeling. Darcy assures her that he was not angry about the unannounced visit: "I felt nothing but surprise." (283) Here, surprise does not suggest dismay but something like the pleasure of serendipity. Echoing Darcy, Elizabeth replies, "Your surprise could not be greater than *mine* in being noticed by you." (283) In effect, their dialogue reframes the mutual surprise (and misprision) of their very first social encounter, when Elizabeth's sensation of being watched by Darcy felt like judgment rather than interest, and Elizabeth's silence might seem like hostility rather than shyness.

After-Shock and Recovery

Among Austen's novels, the late, posthumously published novel *Persuasion* stands out for its attention to the physical effects of ageing and the thousand natural

shocks that flesh is heir to. In particular, it features a scene of life-threatening shock, a jump-scare in more ways than one: Louisa Musgrove's fall from a harbor wall in Lyme Regis. I want to suggest that this episode of bodily trauma is subliminally connected to the emotional trauma that afflicts the outwardly unflappable twenty-seven-year-old heroine, Anne Elliot. Eight years before the novel begins, she was compelled, against her own inclinations, to reject Captain Wentworth's marriage proposal; her encounters with him after that long and lonely interval register as a series of shocks, in language that echoes the description of Louisa's concussive accident. Moreover, the idea of recovery – from loss, injury, illness, heartbreak, or astonishment – pervades the novel, and in this, too, the experiences of Louisa and Anne are intertwined.

Like Marianne Dashwood's tumble, Louisa's fall is character-revealing in the way that it represents a collision between hedonic impulsiveness and the hard facts of a world that does not always conform to one's wishes. While several characters cautiously make their way down a steep flight of stairs, Louisa insists on jumping into Wentworth's waiting arms – for "the sensation was delightful to her."[15] The game is obviously risky, but what distinguishes it is Louisa's desire to *repeat* the sensation of controlled danger, the simulated surprise of falling into the arms of a dashing naval captain. In narrative terms, it does not come as a total surprise that the second jump results in a severe concussion. Several Gothic features can be traced in this episode: the temporal dilation of a traumatic moment, with a granular attention to the phases of the unfolding scene; the formal enactment of agitation and alarm through use of dashes; the intimation of mortality; the reactions of horror, speechlessness, and even a fainting fit. What is especially striking is the way that Austen widens the tableau to include the perspective of gawking boatmen, for whom the accident becomes an occasion "to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady," as if it were a live-action Gothic tableau (93). For these passers-by, Louisa's fall is not, to quote Auden on human suffering, an "important failure;" it is merely "something amazing."[16] Austen adds yet another perceptual layer to the shock through the perspective of the surgeon who responds to the emergency. His diagnostic language reflects the plain fact that he is treating an anonymous injured body: "The head had received a severe contusion, but he had seen greater injuries recovered from." (94) Not Louisa's head, but *the* head, a body part to be treated. After years of seeing such cases, this is not a shocking event,

15 Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

16 W.H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1991), 146-47.

and neither permanent debilitation nor full recovery would come as a surprise to the surgeon.

In her convalescence, Louisa suffers from a form of PTSD, as she "starts and wriggles" (176) at the merest sound of a shut door; meanwhile, her accident produces lingering shockwaves among those who witnessed it. Recalling the "frightful hour," Wentworth passes his hand across his eyes "as if the remembrance were still too painful," and he remarks to Anne that she "must have suffered from the shock, and the more for its not overpowering you at the time" (147). During the emergency, capable Anne offered the most level-headed assistance, but Wentworth reasonably assumes that she must now be experiencing a post-traumatic return of the repressed. Anne assures him that she has suffered no such thing; but on a deeper level, Wentworth might as well be describing the vexed history of their relationship, which has indeed been characterized by aftershocks and remembrances too painful to relive. In their first fleeting reunion after eight years, Wentworth loses his composure at the "surprise of finding himself alone with Anne Elliot," while Anne is left "speechless," with a "painful agitation" that could not easily be "recovered from." Only "a long application of solitude and reflection" is said to "recover" her (67-69). Later in the novel, Anne is startled when she runs into Frederick on the street in Bath, and Austen's description of her reaction – a cognitive and perceptual paralysis – harks back to Gothic tropes of astonishment: "For a few minutes she saw nothing before her; it was all confusion." (141) In the novel's denouement, when Anne reads Frederick's astonishing declaration of unbroken love for her, the narrator describes its effect with a familiar trope ("Such a letter was not to be recovered from"), and those who witness her perturbation are "shocked and concerned" that she appears "very ill" (191).

Anne is far from ill, of course, but it is notable that the language of shock and recovery runs through the experiences of both Louisa and Anne. This makes sense at the level of plot, for the engagement of one clears a path for the resurrected match of the other. During her convalescence, Louisa falls in love with Captain Benwick, who has been dealing with his own trauma after the death of his fiancée. The news of their engagement shocks Anne ("She had never in her life been more astonished;" 133), but it also gives her joy in realizing that Wentworth is no longer in danger of marrying Louisa, thus effectively "unshackled" (136). Anne's astonishment is partly driven by her assumption that the pensive, poetry-loving Benwick is not well matched with the flighty and high-spirited Louisa. Moreover, in an earlier conversation with Benwick, Anne had feared that his immersion in Walter Scott and Byron would only exacerbate his sufferings, that "lines which imaged a broken heart" would do the opposite of mending his. For his recovery, Anne prescribes a literary antidote – "a larger allowance of prose" that would

"rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances" (85).

There is more than one irony in Anne's advice. Even in the moment, the acutely self-aware Anne knows that she has not profited from the kind of syllabus she has recommended, that "she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination" (85). Moreover, in the poetry-vs.-prose debate that Austen stages, she leaves out her own genre of fiction, which might conceivably offer Benwick some welcome diversion. In *Northanger Abbey*, she had heartily defended the cultural value of novels, arguing that "our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world" (23). But this is not a banner that Anne takes up: on this and other matters, she is not infallible.

Finally, despite Anne's suspicions about the deleterious effects of lyrical effusions, poetry turns out to be a form of salvation in the end. During Louisa's convalescence, Captain Benwick sits at her elbow while "reading verses, or whispering to her, all day long" (176). In a way that Anne could not have predicted, poetry helps to animate a relationship that results in an engagement, which in turn enables Anne's own reversal of conjugal fortunes. In her warning about the dangers of verse, Anne does not consider that, as Wordsworth insisted, the metered language of poetry offers "the co-presence of something regular," something that modulates states of passionate feeling. Contrary to her assumption, poetry about heartbreak does not necessarily exacerbate that condition. By the same token, a prose description of a character's surprise or shock does not necessarily reproduce that exact feeling in the mind of a reader, and the effects of any form of writing are variable and unpredictable. Asserting the superiority of his own literary genre over the novel, Wordsworth insisted that "the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once."[17] With respect to Louisa Musgrove's poetic therapy, Wordsworth may have a good point – one that challenges Anne's narrow assumptions about reading practices. Then again, I have to assume that he never experienced the pleasure of re-reading Jane Austen.

[17] William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *The Prose Works*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1:146, 150. In response to Wordsworth, Coleridge offers a different account of metre, suggesting that it subconsciously holds and heightens the reader's attention by producing "the continued excitement of surprize." In likening its effects to "a medicated atmosphere" and "wine during animated conversation," he ambiguously implies both stimulation and relaxation. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 7:66.

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