

The Rhetoric of Hospitality in Austen and Edgeworth

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I have the pleasure of introducing Scott Juengel, who teaches now at Vanderbilt University. He held previous appointments at South Alabama and at Michigan State. He is currently at work on two books, one called *Catastrophe Enlightenment* and the other called *Hospitality in the Age of Austen* (from which this essay is excerpted). Let me also introduce Adela Ramos. She holds a Ph.D. in English literature from Columbia. Currently she teaches at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, and she is at work on a longer project exploring animal and human relations in the long eighteenth century.

What their two papers share, I think, quite obviously is a concern with modernity. That is to say: how does the practice of hospitality inflect larger shifts, whether cultural, economic, or literary? Furthermore, we would probably see these shift as synonymous with Romanticism, or with a Romantic sensibility. For example, Scott's paper addresses a variety of issues in Austen's works: race in *Sandition*, manners in *Northanger Abbey*, and perhaps most provocatively, the idea of tenancy in *Persuasion*. He places a great deal of emphasis on the idea of living in property that is leased or rented, as opposed to owned. So this excerpt comes from page 188 in your reader:

In contrast to the ancestral home, *Persuasion's* emphasis on tenancy turns the old symbolic structures inside out: the leased home is not an expression of the owner's singular reputation or rank, but testifies to a negotiated agreement between parties that is economic in nature but also, as *Persuasion* intimates, capable of articulating new ethical permutations that intend toward the other.

So, tenancy is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, Scott suggests, it invites the individual to practice what Michel Serres describes as "universal dispossession," in which the world "becomes a global rental, the *Hotel for Humanity*. We no longer own it; we only live here as tenants" (Juengel 189).¹

Adela's paper, by contrast, looks at three exotic pets in Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda*: a blue macaw, a bowl of goldfishes, and large dog named Juba. She sees them as a site for exploring numerous issues: empire, exoticism, and gender, just to name a few. Ultimately, she asks a series of provocative questions: are animals worthy of hospitality? When did they become worthy of hospitality? And most interestingly, which animals are worthy of hospitality? So, Juba (the dog) reflects precisely the new logic of dispossession discussed by Scott. Unlike the lapdogs of the early eighteenth century, a pet is not a possession. Rather, it is much more strongly conceived as a person. As Adela puts it, the pet is anthropomorphized: "Mr. Vincent's excessive love for Juba leads him to conceive of the dog as an extension of himself" (204).

Now, my question is the same for both of you. What role does the very form of the novel play in "hosting" or, one might say, in "entertaining" such ideas and questions? Is it simply an empty receptacle for values held by Austen, Edgeworth, and their contemporaries? Or is it something

¹ Michel Serres, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon, *Malfesance: Appropriation through Pollution?* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

stronger: a literary form that is uniquely suited for developing such values? To the catalogue of modernities that you both describe, I would add two more. First of all, there arose in the late-eighteenth century the word “novel” in its current form (against other terms like “romance,” or “history,” or “moral tale”). And second, there arose a view of the novel as a positive cultural force. This was something, of course, noted by Austen herself, in her famous defense of novels in *Northanger Abbey*: “Yes, novels;—for I will not adopt that ingenuous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding.” There is much to remark upon here. First, Austen’s characteristic irony seems to dissipate for a moment. And second, it is a passage that will go on to mention *Belinda* by name:

Such is the common cant. —‘And what are you reading Miss ---?’ ‘Oh! It is only a novel!’ replies the young lady, while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. —‘It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;’ or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.

And so, Scott, I’d like to give you a topic to consider: Austen’s irony. It is part of her modernity. It is part of the reason for her status as a cult author, which you discuss briefly. Is it possible to see Austen’s irony as a form of rhetorical hospitality? Because what it does is to open a door to the reader. It invites the reader into a sympathetic relationship, one based on shared knowledge and shared values. It creates a within, and consequently a without. To give an example: we read in the dazzling opening of *Northanger Abbey*, that “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her to be born an heroine... [Her father] had a considerable independence besides two good livings – and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters.” Is not a door opened here? Is the point not to invite inside those readers who get the references (to *Tom Jones* and to *Clarissa*)? There is humor, and perhaps even hostility, surely. But is not the point to create a bond with those readers who might share her view that the novel has quite preposterously focused on instances of fathers locking up their daughters in its young history? Might we see it, therefore, as a form of hospitality, one that reverses the inhospitality later shown by characters like Isabella and John Thorpe, and Gen. Tilney?

Adela, I’m going to offer you a topic as well: the form of the Bildungsroman. *Belinda* is very strongly within the tradition of the Bildungsroman, which we typically see as beginning with *Wilhelm Meister*, a few years earlier. It is a form that depends, almost paradoxically, on both growth and sameness. By the end of the novel, Belinda (and perhaps Lady Delacour) emerges not a different person, but as the same person transformed: a better version of the same person. The point is that it is a form obsessed with concepts of personhood, and questions of identity. How does this make it the ideal form for viewing animals as persons as well?