

Episode 96 - The Thing about John Thorpe's Gig

Zan: [00:00:00] Welcome to The Thing About Austen, a podcast about Jane Austen's world. I'm Zan.

Diane: And I'm Diane. And this episode, we're talking about John Thorpe's gig. So before we get into this episode, we should just say a little bit of innuendo in here that we will be talking about, so just. FYI, we're just letting you know up top.

So the scene in question for today's episode is the scene in Northanger Abbey where we are first introduced to John Thorpe, who has just arrived in Bath with James Morland in tow. And that's really all we need to say about it, because Thorpe can speak for himself. Just it paints a picture.

Zan: It sure does.

All right. So here we go. What do you think of my gig, Miss Morland? A neat one, is not it? [00:01:00] Well hung. Town built. I have not had it a month. It was built for a Christchurch man, a friend of mine, a very good sort of fellow. He ran it a few weeks till, I believe, it was convenient to have done with it. I happened, just then, to be looking out for some light thing of the kind, though I had pretty well determined on a curricule, too.

But, a chance to meet him on Magdalene Bridge, as he was driving into Oxford last term. Ah, Thorpe, said he. Do you happen to want such a little thing as this? It is a capital one of the kind, but I'm cursed tired of it. Oh, damn, said I. I am your man. What do you ask? And how much do you think he did, Miss Morland?

I'm sure I cannot guess at all. Curricule hung, you see. Seat, trunk, sword case, splashing boards, lamps, silver molding. All you see complete. The iron work, as good as new, or better. He asked 50 guineas. I closed with him directly, threw down the [00:02:00] money, and the carriage was mine.

Diane: So much information there. Both said and unsaid.

You know, you just, you know a lot about this guy right from the jump. So let's get into this. What is a gig? A gig was a simple, relatively affordable, two

wheeled carriage drawn by a single horse and generally carried two people side by side. According to Sally Walren's Encyclopedia of Driving, all gigs have two wheels and, with a few exceptions, all have a forward facing seat for two people, the driver and one passenger.

The rare exceptions were those built with a single seat for the use of doctors and those built for trotting matches, which, owing to their solitary seat, were known as sulkies. Which is a great name.

Zan: The solitary seat is the sulky. I just, you know, I love that. I appreciate it deeply. Walrond continues, explaining that gigs likely evolved from the [00:03:00] sedan cart, which essentially resembled a sedan chair on wheels.

Her description of this cart sounds deeply, deeply uncomfortable, just so you know. But by the 1790s, the gig was its own distinct kind of vehicle.

Diane: In her article, Very Knowing Gigs, Social Aspiration and the Gig Carriage in Jane Austen's Works. Aoife Byrne writes, For Austen, the gig was a new invention.

Their wide popularization by the Tilbury Coachmakers in Mount Street, London, coincided temporally with the first entry of gig in the OED in 1791. And by the turn of the century, they were nearly ubiquitous.

Zan: As their popularity grew, coach builders were turning out gigs of all sorts of shapes and sizes to suit the individual requirements of their customers.

According to Walrond, gigs were named after their designers, like the Stan Hope. After their coachbuilders, like the Tilbury Gig, and after their shape, like the Whale [00:04:00] Bottom, there were Lawton Gigs, Liverpool Gigs, Roundbacked Gigs, and Bucket Seat Gigs. There were Hooded Gigs, Skeleton Gigs, and Spider Gigs.

The varieties were endless.

Diane: In William Felton's 1796 *Treatise on Carriages, comprehending coaches, chariots, Phaetons, Kerkels, Gigs, Whiskies, and Together with their proper harness, in which the fair prices of every article are accurately stated*, that was the whole title, he describes two specific categories of gigs, the chair backed gig and the gig curricule.

Felton's categories give us more of a sense of the general type of gig Thorpe might be using.

Zan: So yeah, we're going to break down these two categories, you know, lots of things in between, but this is the kind of basic breakdown. So, The gig curricule, according to Felton, is intended for a single horse and, quote, only by chance with two.

So this is still definitely a gig, [00:05:00] but it aspires to be a curricule. Just for context, in *Jane Austen's Journeys*, Hazel Johnes points out that the curricule was the Porsche of its time, twice the price of a gig and twice as fast, being pulled by two horses separated by a pole. So this is the kind of carriage that Henry Tilney has.

But a gig curricule is a bit different.

Diane: Instead of having a straightforward frame with two shafts that go from the back of the vehicle to the horse, a gigcurricule could have bowed shafts that allow the seat of the gig to rest on leather straps. But it is still essentially a single horse vehicle trying to look fancier than it is.

Much like Thorpe aspires to be something fancier than he is.

Zan: So true. Uh, so when Thorpe insists that his gig is curricule hung, he's most likely referring to a gig curricule. But the rest of Thorpe's description doesn't really [00:06:00] match what Felton describes. So, me thinks Thorpe doth lie. Shocker.

Diane: What? He would never.

Zan: So, just for a little bit of additional context on a gig pericle, the base price for this vehicle is 36 pounds, three shillings, and zero pence. The full trim kit, Felton describes, okay, he calls it, he calls it extras for being precise, but, but the full trim kit would cost up to 55 pounds.

Diane: The chair back gig, however, is described as, quote, the neatest sort of a one horse chaise in use, and Felton specifically describes this as, quote, independent of fashion.

So, basically, not the sexiest model, but the more pragmatic one. And Felton also lists the additional trim kit for the average chair back gig. And this includes, drumroll please, a trunk, silver molding, and a sword case.

Zan: [00:07:00] So, some

similarities there.

And

the base price for this model is listed as, Thirty one pounds, fourteen shillings, six pence.

So it's most likely that Thorpe had a chair back gig rather than a gig curricule. And this leads Byrne to conclude that Thorpe is, quote, attempting to overcompensate for his lesser carriage by exaggerating the quality of his gig, labeling it curricul hung.

Diane: Byrne's reference to overcompensating means we have to pause for a moment to address the Euphemism in the room, because it's just sitting there staring at us.

Zan: It's just, it's just right there.

Diane: It's right there. Thorpe first says his gig is well hung, and then curricule hung, and we just can't overlook multiple references to hung. Whether Austen intended this or not, if we don't address it, you guys are going to email us, like, we just know it. So.

Zan: It's just, it's just especially when you have to say it over and over like we are.

Yeah. It's, it's [00:08:00] unavoidable, right? So, you know, did we spend the time in the OED to confirm that this slang was around before this era? Of course. Have you met us?

Diane: We know how to party, okay? Right?

Zan: We are this cool. So, according to the OED, the phrase, well hung, meaning, quote, having pendant organs, appears in Francis Gross's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* in 1785.

And there are plenty of other precedents, so we know that within this period, that phrase did mean what we think it means.

Diane: Yes. Yes. And John Thorpe as a character, based off other things that he says, definitely seems like the type who would both know and use that slang. Even in front of a lady, without thinking about it.

Zan: Yes. Yes. And, you know, I'm positive Catherine has no idea what's going on. But, you know, again, we don't know if Austen was using this slang purely intentionally, but also we [00:09:00] wouldn't put it past her.

Diane: And we certainly at least have to address it, so.

Zan: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Diane: Again, we do this for you all. Anyway, so, back to gigs.

In all of his talk about gigs, Thorpe essentially lists the attributes of his carriage like he's reading from Felton's treatise or other ads from this era. So he's very aware of the lingo and he's trying to impress Catherine, using the carriage as a metaphor for his suitability as a suitor. So Byrne points out that, quote, Aris hunting John Thorpe's excuse for not owning the more expensive curricule is related to Catherine as a chance opportunity to purchase a gig from a friend as a favor.

So, you know, like Obviously, I have this not as great carriage, but it's because I'm such a good guy, and I'm actually really amazing, and also like, look how much I know about my car, don't you want to hear me tell you all about it?

Zan: Yes. So, one of the reasons that all that pricing that we listed from Felton's work is so important [00:10:00] Beyond the fact that we just love those kinds of details, is that this also, again, tells us a bit more about Thorpe and his great deal that he's trying to tell Catherine about.

So, again, he tells Catherine that it cost him 50 guineas, but realize that this is a second hand gig that, at a brand new base model price, would cost a lot more. Only 31. So HazeJohnones points out that 15 pounds would be sufficient to cover the purchase of the necessary extras, such as blocks, boots, coach boxes, or wheels, and another six pounds for the inessential glitter, like a sword case, lamps, splashing board, and silver molding.

So Johnes explains, it turns out, the guy Thorpe buys this gig from takes full advantage of his friend's ignorance. Friends in air quotes there, by the way.

Diane: Yeah, he's basically paying new car prices for something used. So, not such a good deal after all.

Zan: Uh [00:11:00] huh.

Diane: Felton's Guide actually warns against buying from unscrupulous second hand sellers who would sell you a, quote, gingerbread carriage, which is a great description.

Zan: It's so much more poetic than a lemon, you know? A gingerbread carriage.

Diane: Actually, I kind of want, it's like, delicious, I want that. Right? Right? He continues, Many strangers to carriages will risk a purchase on their own superficial knowledge, taking the appearance for the sufficiency, which is soon proved to consist of rotten materials, nicely surfaced with putty and showy painting, or perhaps ornamented with a new inside lining and some slight painted furniture.

Zan: Hmm.

Diane: Rotten inside, with some showy painting on the outside. Weirdly! Also describes Thorpe.

Zan: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Yes. And finally, in terms of finances, people in this era would have realized that these up front costs would have only been the beginning of gig ownership expenses. [00:12:00] In Stephen Mahoney's book, *Wealth or Poverty?*

Jane Austen's Novels Explored, he explains that it would cost nearly 50 guineas each year for running and maintaining this gig. This cost would include things like the servant or groom who might travel with him, duties, repairs, horse maintenance, taxes, etc.

Diane: Mahoney goes on to explain that Over four years, one could spend almost half the cost of a carriage again in repairs, new wheels, and repainting.

At the end of four years, a carriage would be worth about one third of its new cost. So very roughly, the annual capital cost of a carriage might be about 30 percent of its new cost in its first years.

Zan: Alright, so now we want to talk a bit about the cultural context of driving as a pastime for young men during this period.

We did talk a bit about this and the practice of imitating coachman's fashions in our episode on Henry Tilney's great coat. And we want to develop that a bit more [00:13:00] here because imitating the coachman's job, fashion, slang, all of this was a big deal for young men at this time.

Diane: Thorpe exemplifies some of the extremes of this trend.

He enters the novel when Catherine and Isabella are essentially following a couple of young men from the pump room. They were prevented crossing by the approach of a gig, driven along on bad pavement by a most knowing looking coachman, with all the vehemence that could most fitly endanger the lives of himself, his companion, and his horse.

Zan: Yeah, and this is a lot about his driving abilities. Isn't it? So Thorpe is this knowing looking coachman. And Austen then goes on to describe him as, quote, a stout young man of middling height, who, with a plain face and ungraceful form, seemed fearful of being too handsome, unless he wore the dress of a groom.

Austen giving him some side eye there.

Diane: So we see him imitating the coachman's style and dress, but he [00:14:00] takes that a step further. Johnes writes, It was fashionable to copy the dress and speech, the whistling and swearing of the professional coachman, who drove the public stagecoaches. Thorpe's talk of horses, dogs, the minutiae of carriage construction, and chiefly of himself, is peppered with dammit and oh lord and frequent exclamations amounting almost to oaths.

He boasts of his own skills as a coachman and of the superiority of his own equipage.

Zan: Thorpe also embraces the trend of the aggressive and chaotic driving that was popular at this time. So when he drives into Bath, and later when he takes Catherine halfway to Blaise Castle, Austen is not complimentary about his driving skills.

And Catherine, for one, is definitely not impressed, right? She's kind of frightened about being on this coach with him.

Diane: But young men's daredevil antics in gigs were common enough that Austen is just extending the parody that already exists. [00:15:00] For example, in his biography of Mighon, sportswriter Charles James Aberle Better known

by his nom de plume, Nimrod, narrates scene after scene illustrating the Regency era Daredevil's risk taking.

Here is an example of one of those scenes.

Zan: As he was one day driving, one of them in a gig, who expressed a strong regard for his neck, with a hint that he considered it in some danger, Mightn addressed him thus. Was you ever much hurt then by being upset in a gig?

Diane: No, thank God, said his companion, for I never was upset in one.

Zan: What? replied Mighton. Never upset in a gig? What a damn slow fellow you must have been all your life. And, running his near wheel up the bank, over they both went, fortunately without either being much injured.

Diane: Sounds like a fun outing.

Zan: Mm hmm. He's like, it is obligatory that you get dumped out of a gig, and I'm going to oblige you.

You're welcome.

Diane: You must experience this. Yes. [00:16:00] So when Austen depicts Thorpe as driving his gig in this same vein, she's leaning into the cultural joke about rash young men. And why they might not be the kind of guy you want to go for a drive with. She's packed a lot of shorthand knowledge about his character into just a few scenes.

Zan: Yeah, yeah. Which is, you know, why this is, it's, it's so, it's so beautiful when she's able to do that. So at this point, we've talked about the commercial and cultural contexts of Thorpe's gig. So now let's talk a little bit more about why this matters in the wider context of Austen's novels. So Byrne points out that carriages were a literal emblem of people's social mobility and status.

She writes, The specific model of carriage more subtly reflected its owner's income. Jane Austen's works are full of references to models, including the gig, the curricle, the Baruch Landau, the Shays, and the Phaeton. They all provide, or [00:17:00] augment, revealing characterizations and modulations on class.

Diane: And the gig, across Austen's novels, is a marker of the nouveau riche, or rising middle class.

In Northanger Abbey, Thorpe's gig is one of many in Bath, which we understand when Isabella and Catherine can't cross Cheap Street. Oh, these odious gigs, said Isabella, looking up, how I detest them.

Zan: And then immediately she's like, oh look, it's my brother. Um, yeah.

Diane: But

Byrne explains that Isabella's frustration, quote, signifies the overabundance of gigs around Bath.

Their topological location on Cheap Street Cheap Street. Is two suggestive of their own relative cheapness. It's equally important that Cheap Street connects with the London and Oxford roads. The inference is that these gigs are leisurely driven by young men from London or Oxford.

And later, when Thorpe gives Catherine the inventory description of his gig, Byrne explains that quote.

The [00:18:00] gig ceases to be the linguistic focus of the conversation as his social aspiration becomes increasingly evident.

Zan: Like, the fact that he's, like, truly just listing attributes, it's kind of like, okay, this is, this is not actually about the gig, is it? So Thorpe's attitude towards gigs is also a really stark contrast to Henry Tilney and his abilities with the curricule.

Again, he's so swoony, he drives so well.

Diane: Those innumerable capes, we just cannot handle it.

Zan: Mm hmm. Yes. And Thorpe was also a contrast to the Moreland siblings as well. So, while Thorpe is busy trying to sound better than he is, neither Catherine nor James are making any pretensions about their social and financial positioning.

So, James Moreland, for instance, he rents a gig in Bath when he wants to drive Isabella. And, While they're doing this, Thorpe is sitting there making digs. James and Catherine is kind of like, I [00:19:00] think he's making some logical spending decisions.

Diane: She's like, he can't afford it. What are you talking about?

Zan: She has no idea why Thorpe is making these digs.

She doesn't, she doesn't understand that because Again, she's not pretending to have more money than she has.

Diane: There is one last detail about Thorpe's gig that Byrne points out in her article that is just a great close reading of his entrance to the novel. She points out that Thorpe meets back up with Catherine, Isabella, and James after, quote, giving orders about the horses.

Now some scholars have considered this reference to horses, plural, as a typo. Since a gig is a single horse vehicle, and in addition to that, the text earlier describes Thorpe's driving as being capable of endangering, quote, the lives of himself, his companion, and his horse. Singular. But Byrne speculates that this might be an instance of free and direct discourse that allows narrative space for Thorpe to try to sound fancier than he is.

Pretending to have multiple [00:20:00] horses, even though it is a factually stupid thing for him to do because everyone can see that he has one horse.

Zan: There's just one horse there, sir. So, yeah, ultimately, Thorpe's gig reveals him to be a guy who uses discussion of his equipage to compensate for his insecurities.

Diane: And we will just leave that there. Yeah. So, gigs show up in a lot of Austen's works, and because of that, this will be a bit of a highlight reel. So if we don't get to your favorite gig mentioned, our apologies. For example, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward says he's not really interested in being the dashing kind of guy who drives around town in a gig.

It's like, hmm. That's, that's for other guys.

Zan: Mm hmm. He's like, that's just, that's just not my style. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Collins owns a gig, which is in contrast to Darcy, who drives a curricule. So, a very similar contrast between Thorpe and Tilney happening in that, in that novel. And in [00:21:00] *Sanditon*, Sir Edward Denham and his sister have a gig, and Miss Denham particularly wishes that they had something fancier.

Diane: And in Persuasion, the Crofts are driving around in a gig when they offer Anne a ride home. This example is perhaps notable since the Crofts are not even a little bit self conscious about their vehicle. Byrne describes this as a scene where the gig signifies not modest means, as Admiral Croft is rich enough to rent Kellynch Hall, but his freedom from social vanity and his close partnership with his wife.

They're like, yeah, we're Who needs anything more? A gig is just fine for us. Like, there's no pretensions about it.

Zan: Also, I have a ship .

Diane: Mm hmm. Yeah, exactly. I don't have to pretend here.

Zan: I also love that the trope of, like, crashing in a gig due to bad driving is definitely also present in this scene since Wentworth jokes about, like, I wonder where they're going to overturn today.

But again, this is more of a representation of the Crofts just, like, enjoying each other's company. Because he's like, you know, she's fine with it, right? He's, [00:22:00] yeah. He's talking about this in a way that is so clearly more about their relationship. Because even at one point, while Anne is with them, Mrs.

Croft reaches over and takes the reins from her husband. And it's, it's just adorable because it's really a commentary. Like, on their relationship, like, the fact that they have a quality relationship, that theirs is also somewhat equitable because they're just, you know, they're just who they are.

Diane: And practically speaking also, if they're kind of like, mm, Admiral's not the best driver, so let's just get a gig.

Like, let's not spend a ton of money on something. He might crash.

Zan: Yes, he's probably gonna crash this thing.

Diane: Yeah. He's like, I'm sorry. I I'm sorry. I am not for land vehicles. I, I pilot the seas.

Zan: Exactly. He's like, I have bigger ships to float. I mean, literally, but yeah, there's, there's this like the exception to the rule.

And I think, I think it's really, really delightful again, that it's, it is this kind of up and coming class, but it's also all about the way that they are presented as a couple [00:23:00] and as, as people who are very comfortable with being like, it is what it is. We just need a gig.

Diane: Well, if you have thoughts on gigs, or perchance have ridden in one, we want to hear all about it.

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Zan: Stay tuned for next episode and we'll be talking about Mullins.

Diane: Thanks for listening. Bye.