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Through the Female Perspective: An Analysis of Male Characters in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

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Through the Female Perspective: An Analysis of Male
Characters in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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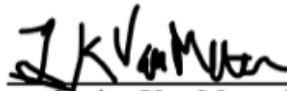
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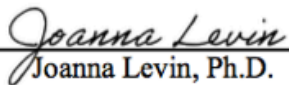
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May 2021

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Northanger Abbey

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ABSTRACT

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Abbey

by Natalia Sanchez

Literary scholars have long examined Austen's *Northanger Abbey* with a central focus on the female characters, the narrator, the lack of education of upper-middle class women, and overall satire of gothic tropes. This essays turns away from the predominantly feminine focus by delving into an analysis of the male characters, who are often overlooked and generalized in Austenian discourse. This essay further expands on gothic and feminist analyses by providing an in-depth exploration of the male characters relative to their importance to the main protagonist's coming of age as well as Austen's depiction of masculinity and male privilege.

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Introduction

Most critics and scholars within Jane Austen discourse agree that *Northanger Abbey* is a novel of education specifically framed around the problem of upper-class women being severely undereducated during the eighteenth century, a problem not often seen in upper-class men during the same time period. Despite the novel's clear satire of the gothic genre, the focus of scholars, such as Claudia L. Johnson, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Laura Mooneyham White, is Catherine Morland's education and growth through a feminist lens. This feminist focus on the education of the main protagonist often leads to arguments surrounding the caliber of the male characters in *Northanger Abbey*, resulting in the sidelining or overlooking of them, which frequently ends with each of the seven men categorized in static gothic archetypes such as, gothic tyrant, sentimental hero, and absentee father. However, there is more to the male characters in the novel than their individual stereotype, especially within the bounds of Austen's brand of irony and satire.

In this essay, I pick up where prominent critics and feminist scholars leave off on their analyses of the male characters in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. I focus primarily on Henry Tilney, John Thorpe, and General Tilney, who are the three male characters who have the most influence over the plot and prompt Catherine's growth into the heroine she must become. I will also explore the concept of father figures and gentlemen with a specific focus on secondary male characters: Mr. Allen, James Morland, Captain Frederick Tilney, and Mr. Richard Morland. I examine each individual man within a gothic and feminist lens, focusing predominantly on their influence on and treatment of Catherine. Finally, I analyze the use of Austen's brand of feminism

in regards to her construction of masculinity in the novel with a focus on Henry Tilney's characterization.

Father Figures and Gentlemen

Catherine Morland is described in *Northanger Abbey* as being a plain girl from the country who does not yet fit into the trope of a gothic heroine. It is no surprise then that her father does not differ from that same description, in fact, the entire family is said to be “in general very plain” (Austen 5). A country parson and father of ten children, Mr. Richard Morland is a man of some wealth who “had never been handsome” and was not “in the least addicted to locking up his daughters” (5). Mr. Morland is a middle-class clergyman with two livings who is not particularly attractive, wealthy, or eccentric. Like his daughter, he does not quite fit into the specific trope allotted to him, in his case, that of a gothic tyrant. However, Mr. Morland does fall into a certain gothic trope: the absentee father. According to Fred Botting, the missing or absentee parent is a common trope in gothic fiction that is often used as a way to denote the lack in the main protagonist's upbringing. Mr. Morland has a single line of dialogue and is physically on the page in only eleven instances throughout the novel. Most of his appearances are occasions in which Catherine speaks of her family with others, especially when her older brother comes to Bath. Catherine talks about her father and siblings in a nostalgic way that indicates that her home life was decent, but her mentions are few enough that Mr. Morland is often overlooked by readers and scholars alike. Though Mr. Morland's absence is felt in the narrative, he inadvertently sets the story in motion by saying that Catherine is growing “into a good-looking girl” (6). His observation

carries to the end of the first chapter, which introduces the figurative adoption of Catherine by Mr. and Mrs. Allen, who whisk her off to Bath.

Mr. Allen is an affluent and childless gentleman who owns most of the land in Fullerton and the surrounding property. He invites Catherine on his and Mrs. Allen's trip to Bath, where he acts as her only rational parental figure. Though a man of few words, Mr. Allen offers amiable advice to Catherine, a far more important act than Mr. Morland's solitary parting gift of ten guineas (Austen 10). Mr. Allen is a society man, active among the aristocracy in England, and as such has a more rounded understanding about what is appropriate and inappropriate for young people; he states, "These schemes are not at all the thing. Young men and women driving about the country in open carriages...It is not right," and follows it up by telling Catherine, "I would only advise you, my dear, not to go out with Mr. Thorpe any more" (71). Mr. Allen's approach to being a father figure comes in the shape of actual sound guidance. However, his advice is given after the fact. He does not keep a paternal eye on Catherine; therefore he is not present to tell her prior to her first excursion with the Thorpes that society sees an unmarried man and woman in an open carriage to be untoward, a recipe for scandal. In other words, Mr. Allen is too busy going about Bath to see that Catherine has already done the very thing he advises her not to do. Mr. Allen also does not offer this advice until prompted by Catherine's question, as she does not wish to go with John Thorpe again. Like Mr. Morland, Mr. Allen is also a kind of absentee father.

Similarly to the treatment of absentee fathers by gothic genre authors, the male characters in *Northanger Abbey* are often absent, vaguely mentioned, or simple generalizations in Jane Austen discourse. The aforementioned sidelining of male characters is best exemplified in Kathy Justice Gentile's essay: "All the male characters, except Mr. Allen, Catherine's host in Bath, and her father, who is not an active presence in the narrative, engage in bullying, condescending,

assertive behavior toward Catherine as they assume their positions as the privileged gender” (79). Gentile generalizes about the male characters in *Northanger Abbey*, assuming they all share the same distinct traits that are allowed to them due to male privilege. However, she contradicts herself by stating that the two minor male characters, Mr. Allen and Mr. Morland, are the exception. Mr. Morland is not referred to by name and Mr. Allen is simply “Catherine’s host.” Though the two men are very minor characters, they still exude male privilege by being allowed the freedom of ignoring the problems the women in their lives face. This privilege of neglect is best exemplified in two instances: Mr. Morland not taking the responsibility of properly educating Catherine and the absence of Mr. Allen during Catherine’s first trip to the Pump-room.

The entire plot of the novel centers around Catherine gaining an education in order to become the heroine of her own story. When Mr. Morland fails to teach her anything aside from “writing and accounts” (Austen 6) it leaves her vulnerable to the harsh realities of the world outside her sheltered existence in Fullerton. Likewise, Mr. Allen abandons Catherine when she and Mrs. Allen attend their first ball in Bath and find that they had “no acquaintance to claim, no gentleman to assist them.—They saw nothing of Mr. Allen; and after looking about them in vain for a more eligible situation, were obliged to sit down at the end of a table” (11-12). During the eighteenth century, it was customary for people to be introduced to each other formally in order to have an acquaintance; usually a prior acquaintance with the family had to be made in order for individuals to partake in proper social etiquette while at events. When Mr. Allen leaves his wife and Catherine to their own devices during their first social outing in Bath, he essentially takes any acquaintance from them by not formally introducing them to some of the gentlemen and ladies in his acquaintance. His negligence leads to a dismal situation for Catherine’s first outing and leaves Mrs. Allen embarrassed not to have procured her a partner for dancing. Both Mr. Morland and Mr.

Allen may not comply directly to Gentile's "assertive behavior," but they passively neglect their ward due to their privilege as men of rank.

Among the gentleman who arrive in Bath, there is one whose male privilege is best demonstrated through his relation to Catherine. Her older brother, James Morland is a student at Oxford with aspirations of becoming a clergyman like his father and his eye is set on winning the hand of Catherine's pseudo-friend Isabella Thorpe. James is the perfect gentleman, greeting his sister and the girl he fancies and setting outings for them to enjoy. However, it is James' infatuation with Isabella that makes him a bad brother and strips him of any possible attempts at being a father figure to his younger sister. Instead of aiming to make Catherine more comfortable in the Thorpes' company, he actively endeavors to get what he wants at the expense of his sister. James is so set on marrying Isabella that his male privilege, the freedom to do as he pleases, clouds his judgement. He will not listen to Catherine's objection to going on a carriage ride with the Thorpes despite her explanation that she is engaged to meet Miss Tilney, "'This will not do,' said Catherine; 'I cannot submit to this. I must run after Miss Tilney directly and set her right.' Isabella, however, caught hold of one hand; Thorpe of the other; and remonstrances poured from all three. Even James was quite angry" (Austen 68). James is angry when Catherine refuses to go on an outing as her consent would mean a whole day spent in Isabella's company. He loses his manners over Catherine's rejection instead of asking her the reason for not wanting to be a part of the trio. His sister's emotions and prior engagements are not important to James, who lets his libido command him to the point of mistreating Catherine. His attention is fixed statically on getting close to Isabella, so much so that it enables him and the Thorpes to consistently attempt to bully Catherine into submission.

James also tries to tell Catherine what to think following her introduction to John Thorpe. He describes John as a “good-natured a fellow as ever lived; a little of a rattle; but that will recommend him to your sex I believe: and how do you like the rest of the family?” (Austen 32). Though he poses a question at the end of his insight, his insistence that John is an amiable if talkative man, the latter a trait he believes makes John more appealing to women, is indicative of an ulterior motive. His comments read as if James wants to convince Catherine into believing that John is good company because it will benefit him that Catherine tag along with them. That is to say, if Catherine goes so can Isabella. James closes with a question about the rest of the family because he wants to know if his sister finds Isabella as agreeable as he does, which is similar to asking for approval of his choice in life partner from his family. This, of course, is an attempt to get Catherine to join James and the Thorpes with the hope that while his sister is busy with John, James can have Isabella to himself. But James is not the only one who has set his sights on Isabella.

Captain Frederick Tilney is a handsome, haughty, and rich military man. The oldest son of General Tilney, Captain Tilney is somewhat estranged from his family, not writing home nor sharing his grief with Henry and Eleanor after their mother’s death, but comes to Bath to see them. Of the four men I have mentioned in my analysis so far, Captain Tilney is the first character that does not have a direct influence over Catherine’s life. Rather, Captain Tilney indirectly sets the plot in motion by being James’ foil. Like James, he is infatuated with Isabella. He becomes a prospective suitor, although Isabella is engaged to James by the time they first meet. Catherine is left in a state of utter confusion when Captain Tilney, who had “not only protested against every thought of dancing himself, but even laughed openly at Henry for finding it possible” (Austen 89) is found dancing with Isabella, who had equally spoken against dancing while James was not in town. Captain Tilney is able to convince Isabella to dance with him, flirting with her even though

he knows of her engagement. His behavior prompts Isabella to believe she can win him over, as his wealth is more appealing than the modest living that James will acquire from his father. Captain Tilney, then, comes off as a male coquette, a rake, who has no intention of making anyone, least of all Isabella, his wife. His initial interest, however, spurs the end of James and Isabella's engagement, which in turn brings about the end of the subplot concerning

Isabella Thorpe is the catalyst that ties Catherine's brother and Henry's brother together in *Northanger Abbey*. The two gentlemen are not the most compassionate of characters. Both are condescending bullies who tend to get their way and do not like it when they do not. James and Captain Tilney are natural foils, both are neglectful elder brothers who will inherit a living and see their siblings as a resource for finding out and getting what they want. Their wealth and their individual stances on commitment are the clear divisions between them. James wants to marry and will acquire a modest living, and Captain Tilney will inherit his father's estate and is not looking for a wife. Claudia L. Johnson comments on the scholarly approach to brothers within Jane Austen discourse: "Brothers are treated with great respect in Austenian criticism, certainly with much more than they deserve if *Northanger Abbey* [is] considered with due weight" (37). Brothers are often read as great men despite their shortcomings in Jane Austen discourse, but I take Johnson's observation a step further and say that they are just as respected in the novels as well. In *Northanger Abbey*, brothers are treated with a level of respect not due to their respective characters. Despite James' attempt to bully his sister into complying to his wants, Catherine is concerned and saddened for him when it turns out that Isabella has broken off their engagement. She is also concerned about Captain Tilney's feelings when she believes that he is "falling in love with Isabella, and Isabella unconsciously encouraging him" (Austen 100). Catherine's kind disposition allows her to think better of her brother and her friend's brother to the point of seeing their foibles

as being a product of jilted love instead of a comeuppance for having acted rashly and rudely, in James' case especially towards Catherine. James and Captain Tilney may exact their male privilege—and their privilege as elder brothers—to get what they want, but they do not fall into the category of villains. That title is reserved for a different kind of male character.

A General Among Gentlemen

Imposing and overbearing, General Tilney rules Northanger Abbey with an iron fist. A military man, General Tilney thrives in an environment where everything is in order and everyone is perfectly punctual. The patriarch of the Tilney family is perhaps the most studied of the male characters in *Northanger Abbey*. Diane Hoeveler and Alan D. McKillop, among others, have labeled General Tilney a gothic tyrant. Though a practical reading of General Tilney's character, I argue that he is more of a real villain than a gothic one.

General Tilney is described as a “perfectly agreeable gentleman” who is “tall and handsome, and Henry's father” (Austen 88). Catherine believes that General Tilney could not possibly have faults as he is good-looking and the father of the man she likes. The General's initial treatment of Catherine also helps her to come to such conclusions despite his blatantly irate behavior towards his children. He is disappointed in Captain Tilney for “his laziness” (105) going so far as to reproach him for tardiness in front of Catherine and reprimands Eleanor when she rushes Catherine to dinner the first night at Northanger Abbey (113). General Tilney shows Catherine his best manners and his family members his true nature. In fact, most of the reasons for which he scolds his children are due to how they might have disrespected or slighted Catherine, who is oblivious to the level of reverence to which the General holds her. This same reverential

behavior ultimately confuses his children as they are not aware what his reasoning could be for such treatment. The General holds Catherine in such high regard due to information he received about her from John Thorpe. We learn at the end of the novel that General Tilney has been under the impression that Catherine is rich, more specifically that she is the heiress to Mr. Allen's fortune. Now, being a man of similar wealth as Mr. Allen, General Tilney is overjoyed to see his second son, Henry, be interested in Catherine. The General is gullible enough to believe John's lies, an action which leads to inviting Catherine to stay with them at Northanger Abbey, which also doubles as his ulterior motive to have Catherine and her supposed wealth become a part of the family. The General appreciates fine china and lush gardens at his estate, which indicate how highly he values money. He sees Catherine as a commodity, someone of rank who is to inherit a large fortune, and aims to make her as comfortable as possible while she stays at Northanger Abbey to see to it that she marry his son, accruing further wealth for his family coffers.

The General's innate greed both confirms his status as a villain and sets him apart from a gothic tyrant. A gothic tyrant would have murdered his wife—which is exactly the secret crime that Catherine comes to believe is the grand mystery at the abbey. In her misinterpretation of the General's character, Catherine inadvertently finds out that General Tilney *is* a villain, just not the kind found in her favorite gothic novels. Upon learning that Catherine is not, in fact, rich, General Tilney returns with a vengeance, sending Catherine back to Fullerton without a chaperone on the modern day equivalent of public transportation. He banishes her from Northanger Abbey as though in a reverse-kidnapping by banditti, a common gothic trope. Her sudden banishment from the abbey is the first time Catherine is placed in real danger. She travels approximately seventy miles in a rented carriage with only some money she received as a parting gift from Eleanor, who is the one who breaks the news, "I am indeed a most unwilling messenger," she says, "My dear

Catherine, we are to part. My father has recollected an engagement that takes our whole family away,” and when Catherine asks whether she has offended the General, Eleanor states, “you can have given him no just cause of offense...His temper is not happy, and something has now occurred to ruffle it in an uncommon degree” (Austen 154-155). While away in London, General Tilney finds out that Catherine is not the Allens’ heiress—a rumor that neither the Tilney siblings nor Catherine learn until the end of the novel. The General works himself into a temper, angered to have been deceived, and instead of having the decency to treat Catherine like a human being and have her conveyed home in a courteous and safe manner, insists she be sent home immediately and recalls his children back for a sudden engagement. This sudden engagement is more than likely fabricated by the General for the sake of finding a reason to expel their house guest as soon as possible.

The General’s authority is unopposed and as such, he has the power to turn away anything and anyone who displeases him without hesitation, even someone as vulnerable as a young unmarried woman. General Tilney may not be a monster or a murderer, but he is according to Jane Miller, a “trivial man whose irrational moodiness and inconsiderate behavior frighten his children,” (56) and according to Eddleman, a man whose selfish greed “sets him up as a corrupt authoritarian male” (69). General Tilney is the definition of a toxic authoritarian patriarch. The General sees Catherine as an object, a commodity. When she loses her value as a possible suitor for his son due to her lack of wealth, he essentially disposes of her. His reverence is completely expelled and his true nature as a villain is revealed. His greed and his pompousness prompt him to demonstrate the depth of his apathy towards people who do not fit into his worldview of what he believes is society worth his time. In other words, General Tilney is a money-loving and rank-conscious man who does not wish to associate himself with anyone beneath him in wealth and

status. His apathetic and irrational mindset keeps him within the realm of a corrupt patriarch, a less theatric version of a gothic antagonist, but it also sets him up as a major villain of the novel. However, *Northanger Abbey* has more than one villain.

Enter the Main Villain

John Thorpe's brutish manners, boastful nature, and horrid treatment of women are the tell-tale signs that he is the main antagonist in *Northanger Abbey*. An oaf by any other name, John is as misogynistic as he is conceited. He, not General Tilney, is the main villain because of the amount of damage his lies and manipulations cause throughout the novel, especially in relation to Catherine's life. However, unlike most antagonists, John is not particularly charming or intelligent. He acts as though he is smarter than he actually is, often being corrected by Catherine or the narrator and constantly talks over women and brushes them aside rudely. He is what I would consider the byproduct of the amalgamation of two characters from another of Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice*'s oafish Mr. Collins and greedy Mr. Wickham.

John Thorpe is abrasive, bad-mouthed, and disrespectful to women. James Morland's friend from Oxford, John is described as a "stout" man who has a "plain face and ungraceful form" (Austen 28). He is a large and inelegant man who is obsessed with carriages and horses and has a hard time speaking of anything else, qualities which are unappealing to Catherine. He is also defined in increasingly ironic and contradictory terms in his introduction as he "seemed fearful of becoming too handsome" (28). Unlike the descriptions of the aforementioned male characters, John's description stands out on its own by being almost an entire paragraph long and being as complimentary as it is disdainful. This description seems appropriate to a character like John who

is somehow both unintelligent and a mastermind, both unpleasant and tolerated by others. I mentioned in an earlier section that James Morland believes that though John is rather talkative, he is overall great company for ladies. James' comment is followed by Austen's signature brand of irony when it turns out that John is the only character in *Northanger Abbey* who consistently curses. His repeated ejaculations of "d—" pepper the novel throughout and seem to happen always within hearing distance of polite society, and especially Catherine. His inability to behave like a gentleman around Catherine is indicative of how he treats women regardless of their affiliation to him.

John is a misogynist, which is best exemplified by how he speaks to and about his female family members in addition to his overall treatment of Catherine. When John arrives in Bath, he goes to his widowed mother's home and tells her, "where did you get that quiz of a hat, it makes you look like an old witch" (Austen 32). He further makes his claim as a man who considers women's appearance for the pleasure of the male gaze and overall rudeness by observing that his sisters, "both looked very ugly" (32). Within the span of half a paragraph, John insults both his mother and his sisters in front of Catherine. This is evidence of John's unsuitableness for Catherine, who does not think that John's manners are very gentleman-like, especially for a would-be suitor. It is ultimately her brother's insistence that John is a good man immediately following this instance that makes Catherine have to perform mental gymnastics to understand whether John's alleged appeal to women can be true. Referring to his female family members as "ugly" and "haggard" are key signs of his disrespect for them. A man who can outright insult his mother in front of friends and guests of the house is not something that any woman, much less Catherine, would deem an attractive male trait. These small but poignant instances in which John reveals his

true self behind the self that he and others around him have constructed all lead to his most abrasive villainous act, trying to abduct Catherine like the banditti in gothic novels.

In true gothic villain fashion, John Thorpe abducts Catherine by bullying her into coming on a carriage ride to see Blaize Castle. Thorpe outright lies to her about having seen the Tilneys going about Bath, which weighs heavily on Catherine's conscience as she believes her new friends have reneged on their promise to meet with her. She is ultimately forced to join the trip due to Thorpe's reasoning that she has been stood up and is now free. His lies are revealed when Catherine sees the Tilneys pass by the carriage and she is immediately mortified and tells Thorpe to stop the carriage: "'Stop, stop, Mr. Thorpe,' she impatiently cried. 'Stop, stop, I will get out this moment and go to them.' [But] Thorpe only lashed his horse with a brisker pace," Catherine continues to ask him to stop, but John is unwavering: "But Mr. Thorpe only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made off noises, and drove on" (Austen 58-59). Instead of listening to Catherine's distress and her outright command that he stop the carriage, he actually encourages his horse to go faster. This scene has been read by Jane Austen scholars as being something of a figurative rape, as best stated by Miriam Rheingold Fuller: "[Thorpe's] lies, blatant violation of Catherine's wishes, and delight in violating them show him fully capable of coercion and rape. Austen deliberately strips her villain of any charm, thus stripping away the veneer of romanticism disguising the sordidness of abduction" (96-97). Thorpe's lack of consideration of Catherine's obvious distress is a clear indicator that he is not a good or charming person. There is no concept of female consent in Thorpe's mind. Catherine is in his possession when she is in the carriage, a terrifying and possessive action that could permanently damage a woman's reputation and likewise ruin her sense of self and emotional health. Catherine can do nothing to persuade Thorpe to stop

the carriage and so she is abducted, completely stripped of power like a gothic heroine, and mortified that she inadvertently insulted the Tilneys.

Thorpe's characterization is reminiscent of two male characters from another Jane Austen novel, Mr. Collins and Mr. Wickham from *Pride and Prejudice*. Timothy Peltason argues that "John Thorpe is more a Mr. Collins than a Wickham" (618). I disagree with his statement as Thorpe is something of the amalgamation of Mr. Collins *and* Wickham. Like Mr. Collins, Thorpe is self-absorbed, awkward, inept at understanding others, and has no respect for women's emotions as both men believe that the rejection of their proposal is actually the woman being receptive and/or demure. The only attribute that Thorpe does not have is Collins' respectability. His lack of respectability likens him to Wickham. Much like Wickham, Thorpe is greedy, manipulative, has a knack for false modesty, and is a destructive force in the main protagonist's life. Wickham and Thorpe manipulate their respective narratives due to their avarice, but ultimately fail in their attempts at getting what they want. Thorpe, therefore, is greedy and cunning, but not particularly intelligent.

A battering ram of a character, Thorpe causes all manner of chaos in Catherine's life. He is not the brightest of the male characters, but his ambitious and conceited nature leads to catastrophic turns in the central plot. In his attempts to win over and possess Catherine, Thorpe tries everything in his power to keep her isolated from others such as, trying to drive a wedge between her and the Tilneys by lying to her about them. Trying to keep Catherine's marriage options limited to himself, Thorpe continues his scheme to make her his wife in the most aggressive way. As Joanna L. Thaler states, Thorpe should "be viewed as a creator of mayhem, causing not only emotional disturbances, but disorder and confusion in general [which] show[s] readers that even the most seemingly ridiculous person should not be underestimated in his ability

to cause destruction” (1). It is Thorpe’s boastfulness that truly lets chaos loose and causes serious damage in Catherine’s life. His boasts lead to lying about Catherine being wealthy—a lie which prompts her later dangerous dismissal from Northanger Abbey. Thorpe’s manipulative way of acquiring information from Catherine is blundered by making his inferences from her replies instead of confirming his suspicions by asking or investigating further. He takes his inferences and spreads lies to make Catherine seem more appealing as a match for him. His Collins-like ineptness and Wickham-like greed prompt him to believe that Catherine’s admission of Mr. Allen’s wealth is a confession to being the inheritor of his wealth.

At the start of the novel, Thorpe believes that Catherine is the Allens’ heiress as they are a childless wealthy couple acting as her chaperones in Bath. Thorpe is such a slave to greed, he convinces himself that Catherine’s admission that Mr. Allen is wealthy is a confession of her being the Allens’ heiress (Austen 42, 169). Thorpe, proud to have poached Catherine from Henry and Eleanor and convinced of Catherine’s future riches, cannot help but boast about her when he is approached by General Tilney. The whispered, secret conversation between General Tilney and Thorpe results in Catherine being expelled from Northanger Abbey after initially having been enthusiastically invited to visit at the Tilney family estate. Thorpe’s self-importance, his greed, is what sets the second Volume into action. He boasts about Catherine as though she is a prized horse he hopes to purchase for his carriage and in turn leads to the General turning his attentions on her (Austen 64). Therefore, Thorpe works as an influencer, whispering lies into the General’s ears, only to go back on his word toward the end of the novel, causing Catherine to be put in a precarious position. Luckily for Catherine, Thorpe’s boastfulness ultimately backfires. J Thorpe’s bragging leads General Tilney to invite Catherine to Northanger Abbey in the first place, which ironically brings her and Henry Tilney, the ultimate hero of the novel, closer together.

The Feminized Hero

Wit and agreeableness mark Henry Tilney as the male protagonist and hero in *Northanger Abbey*. A clergyman and second son of a wealthy landowner, Henry has the liberty to use his charm to give off the air of being the quintessential gentleman. This allotted freedom gives way to his sarcastic wit, which can only be described as sarcastic. When Catherine Morland first meets Henry, it is his kind manner and his expert conversational skills that capture her attention. Catherine perceives the world in a literal way, she understands things as they are presented to her, and Henry's ability to converse leaves her wanting to learn more about him. Henry can perceive people's facades to detect ulterior motives, double-entendres, and other such verbal and physical cues. He, unlike Catherine, can see the nuances beneath the niceties that are prevalent throughout English Regency society. Like Austen, Henry can see the underbelly of the world in which he lives. This knowledge presents a captivating male character with ample freedom to mock and critique, but also to dismiss and demean others who partake in traditional customs and conventions. However, his veneer of easy charm and cynicism vanishes when he is faced with the possibility that his father has hurt and banished Catherine, an action which forces him to change, and begs the question: does Henry Tilney's feminization separate him from adhering to toxic masculinity? I will be using Merriam-Webster's definition of "feminize" for this analysis of Henry Tilney's characterization, which is defined as the act of assigning a traditionally feminine attribute to something or someone.

Henry is very much an enigma, a feminized hero, but not quite the feminized hero found in the gothic genre. Stephanie M. Eddleman and Sarah Ailwood have argued that Henry is Austen's

feminine hero and attribute this distinction to his interest in traditionally feminine objects and practices such as: fashion, the picturesque, avid novel reading, and his general knowledge about what society deems acceptable for and from a woman. According to Eddleman, “At first glance, Henry does not seem to be the kind of hero who routs schemes and crushes power. He is, in fact, Austen’s ‘feminized hero,’” and she argues, “The actual feminized heroes of the female gothic novel are men of sentiment,” (70) which Henry is not. *Northanger Abbey* is a satire on the gothic novel and as such, it is entirely plausible that Henry should fall into a liminal space—a gray area between a hero who displays feminine qualities and a gothic hero who lets his emotions lead him to danger and eventually to defeating the villain. Henry does not let his emotions drive him, often using levity and seriousness interchangeably in his conversations, but he does inevitably come to Catherine’s rescue when she is wronged by the novel’s villains. Where the majority of male characters are greedy, misogynistic, and self-serving, Henry is in tune with his emotions, does not care for wealth, and is compassionate to women. He does not let his male privilege dictate whether he should treat women as objects of interest, due in part to her wealth and rank, or as an inconvenience.

Henry’s feminization allows him consideration for women and an understanding of traditional feminine practices and conventions such as general knowledge of textiles, novel-reading, and societal practices between the sexes. Henry’s affinity and knowledge of fabric immediately sets him up as a different sort of male character in his introduction. At the beginning of the novel, after Henry and Catherine’s first dance, he mentions knowing exactly how much Mrs. Allen paid by the yard for the fabric of her dress. Mrs. Allen is partial to fashion and clothing and is delighted by Henry’s knowledge of the price of muslin. When she asks him about it, he explains, “I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often

trusted me in the choice of a gown.” Mrs. Allen is astonished by Henry, saying, “Men commonly take so little notice of those things” (Austen 16). Henry gives away much of his character in this passage in particular as he imparts the information of his having the confidence as a man to choose his own clothing and to aid his sister in the purchase of muslin for her gowns. Mrs. Allen’s remark about men taking little notice of such things separates Henry as a more feminine character. It also explains a crucial point about how different Henry is in comparison to the other male characters in *Northanger Abbey*. For example, Henry’s attentions to Mrs. Allen elucidate that her husband, Mr. Allen, does not focus on such minute details as that of a woman’s dress—Mrs. Allen’s prominent interest. Furthermore, the mention of Eleanor and how she trusts his taste displays the warmth of their relationship and shows how Henry treats women overall. In giving Mrs. Allen his full attention and conversing with her on topics that are suited to her interests supports my argument that Henry is, at his core, a decent and chivalrous man.

Henry is more attuned to women’s experiences and offers comfort when needed to the women in his life. It is implied through their uncanny resemblance in manners that Henry is a great influence in Eleanor’s life following the death of their mother. The two siblings share their knowledge of the picturesque, Eleanor trusts him to choose the muslin for her gowns, and she also admits that she is more fond of Henry than their eldest brother, Captain Tilney. Eleanor’s preference for Henry’s company is best exemplified when Eleanor tells Catherine, “I have no sister, you know—and though Henry—though my brothers are very affectionate, and Henry is a great deal here, which I am most thankful for, it is impossible for me not to be often solitary” (Austen 123). On a walk on the grounds of Northanger Abbey, Eleanor lets slip that Henry was more attentive when Mrs. Tilney passed away than Captain Tilney. She values Henry’s company more so as he is a constant and comforting presence at Northanger Abbey, whereas Captain Tilney

will not even bother to write to his family, much less his grieving sister. Eleanor's insight into Henry's personality gives a better sense of how he cares for his family more than his own wealth and status, unlike his father and brother. His compassionate nature is also displayed when Catherine receives a letter from James that states that he and Isabella have broken off their engagement. Henry follows her into the room after he sees she is disappointed: "he paid her more attention than usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he was aware of it" (137). Henry is sympathetic to Catherine and aims to soothe her after the news leaves her in low spirits. Unlike General Tilney and John Thorpe who see Catherine as an object, Henry values her as a person. This characterization is particular to Henry and leaves no argument for the clear choice of love interest for Catherine.

Among the attributes that set Henry as the love interest for Catherine, is his love of novel reading. According to Jane Miller, "Reading women's novels helps us to understand the processes by which women have rationalized their own subordination to male values and male culture" (37). Novels were often associated with being for women or a woman's genre. Miller argues that it helped women to understand their position in life in regards to their place within the patriarchy, which is why Henry is further feminized for his avid novel-reading. He best displays his enjoyment and knowledge of gothic novels and their common tropes when he relates to Catherine the horrors that she might find at Northanger Abbey. He illustrates a gothic image of the abbey to Catherine for the majority of Volume II Chapter 5, which in turn, leads to the awkward confrontation between them when she is found snooping around in his late mother's old rooms. Catherine admittedly gets wrapped into the fantasy Henry has spun for her, using the abbey's gothic attributes. Henry's fantasy about the gothic horrors to be found at the abbey, later incites Catherine to become suspicious of his father, General Tilney, whom she believes might have actually been Mrs. Tilney's

murderer. Upon finding Catherine in his mother's rooms and learning that she has made up this imagined this murder, his easy and carefree manner turn serious when he explains, "Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained...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" (Austen 136). Though Henry may be witty, agreeable, and in tune with his and other's emotions, he is not prone to letting his emotions get the better of him. Unlike Catherine, he has the ability to perceive situations rationally and is able to separate fact from speculation and fiction. He uses the gothic conventions to explain that Catherine is not, in fact, living in a gothic novel while at Northanger Abbey. Gothic novels often take place in Italy or other non-English speaking countries and focus on Catholic characters (Botting 3-5), hence his pleading that she remember that they are in England and that they are *not* Catholic. Henry's use of each gothic trope is further indicative of his love for novel-reading as he knows and understands the conventions of the gothic genre. Furthermore, his explanation is best suited for Catherine as he knows how much she appreciates and enjoys novels, but also understands her way of thinking and manages to help her grow through the process. However, this passage in particular also gives rise to the argument that Henry is more of a teacher than a suitor. Although he does teach Catherine, he is also teases her in the process.

Henry is a complex and flawed character, at once kind and considerate yet sarcastic and superior. His flaws are visible in his teasing of Catherine, instances that have often led to critiques about whether he is an adequate love interest for her. While on Beechen Cliff, Catherine is instructed on the picturesque by Henry and Eleanor. At the end of a quick lesson, Henry changes the topic from nature to politics, but Catherine's disinterest and lack of knowledge on the subject leads to her comment about something coming out soon in London (Austen 77), which sounds as

though she is commenting on a possible political upheaval or a riot instead of a possible release of a new gothic novel. The misunderstanding immediately sets Henry to teasing Catherine as she relates specific gothic tropes that she thinks will be present in the upcoming novel, which worries Eleanor who believes she is talking about a violent riot. Henry laughs outright about the turn in the conversation:

“Come, shall I make you understand each other, or leave you to puzzle out an explanation as you can? No—I will be noble. I will prove myself a man, no less by the generosity of my soul than the clearness of my head. I have no patience with such of my sex as disdain to let themselves down to the comprehension of yours. Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute—neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgement, fire, genius, and wit,” to which Eleanor replies, “Miss Morland, do no mind what he says” (77-78).

Henry contradicts himself in this passage, he acts superior yet dismisses men. He dismisses women yet elaborates that they may simply be in want of knowledge. Initially, he means to tease Catherine for speaking solemnly about an upcoming novel and Eleanor for believing Catherine alludes to a riot in London, with neither lady aware that they are talking about two distinctly different subjects. This passage, however, has often been labeled misogynistic. Henry has been criticized by prominent feminist scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar as having a condescending manner (138, 144) and by Claire Hughes as being both “pompous and patronizing” (195). Hughes and Gilbert and Gubar share a common argument about Henry acting in a misogynistic and arrogant manner, but they do not take any of Eleanor’s retorts into account in their analyses. Eleanor’s statement is indicative of the normalcy of Henry’s teasing. By telling Catherine to not mind what her brother says, she is claiming that Henry’s words should not be

taken at face value. His sarcasm and teasing often come in many forms and it is Eleanor who is able to properly understand the underlying truth of his speech. This is best exemplified in the scene where Henry is talking about the possibility of having Isabella Thorpe for a sister-in-law, “‘Prepare for your sister-in-law, Eleanor, and such a sister-in-law as you must delight in!—Open, candid, artless, guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise.’ ‘Such a sister-in-law, Henry, I should delight in,’ said Eleanor, with a smile,” (Austen 141-142). Henry teases about having Isabella as a sister-in-law to make light of the news that Catherine received upon Isabella’s and James’ letters confirming the dissolution of their engagement and Isabella’s possible engagement to Captain Tilney. Though the teasing escapes Catherine’s understanding, Eleanor can read the subtext and understand that Henry is actually listing qualities that perfectly describe Catherine. Henry uses his conversational skills to sound superior and comical all while the subtext reveals more about his essential character, his inner truths and desires. Henry, then, is not misogynistic as he does not display traits of toxic masculinity indicative of villainy in *Northanger Abbey*, traits both his father and Thorpe display. However, Henry can be condescending when it comes to educating Catherine.

Jane Austen scholars tend to label Henry as a kind of teacher for his attempts to educate Catherine, and among them are those who believe that Henry is not successful in his attempts. For example, Maria Jerinic argues that Henry is a “failed teacher” (146) whose haughtiness is clear in his mocking of Catherine’s perception of the world and society. I disagree with Jerinic’s argument of Henry as a failed teacher as Catherine is the better for his instruction and he the better for her attentions and interest. Granted, Henry may be condescending in his lessons, but Catherine is receptive to his teaching and teasing and often seeks it out as Susan Morgan argues, “Henry has an active imagination, free from conventional structures, free to perceive and judge the world

around him,” something that Catherine cannot do, and “he is not perfect, but he has learned how to use the powers of the mind and heart, and Catherine is understandably impressed” (121). The difference in their perspectives is what attracts Catherine; she is a blank slate who devours gothic novels and enjoys learning to appreciate things like hyacinths (Austen 119) and Henry has worldly knowledge and experience whose cynicism is slowly chipped away by Catherine’s candidness. Henry imparts the harsher truths of reality on Catherine, occasions in the novel that are often cited as the most patronizing, such as the aforementioned moment in the hallway where Catherine admits to having believed General Tilney killed Mrs. Tilney. Moreover, I agree with these readings of Henry, but only to an extent. The truly ingenious aspect of Henry’s personality lies in his ability to change from a man who is a condescending teacher and teasing suitor to a chivalrous hero.

Henry becomes a chivalrous hero because he sets aside his levity and intellectual superiority enough to rebel against his father and rescue Catherine. In Volume II Chapter 15, Henry arrives in Fullerton to seek out Catherine, who was dismissed from Northanger Abbey by the General. Henry was not at the abbey when Catherine was forced to leave and was not informed of the situation until his return from Woodston. When he is informed of the situation, Henry’s levity disappears: “Henry’s indignation on hearing how Catherine had been treated, on comprehending his father’s views, and being ordered to acquiesce in them, had been open and bold,” but the General’s anger “could not intimidate Henry, who was sustained in his purpose by a conviction of its justice. He felt himself bound as much in honor as in affection to Miss Morland, and believing that heart to be his own which he had been directed to gain, no unworthy retraction of a tacit consent, no reversing decree of unjustifiable anger, could shake his fidelity, or influence the resolutions it prompted” (Austen 171). Austen’s word choice is very specific in this scene: open, bold, conviction, honor, fidelity. All of these words are key descriptors of Henry’s

characterization. He is resolved to defy his father, whose imperiousness is not often challenged by the Tilney children, for the sake of honor and affection. This act of rebellion against his father is paralleled by his rejection of the standard form of masculinity. Henry is feminized; he does not conform to the same brand of masculinity with which the other male characters in *Northanger Abbey* personify. He is not the avaricious, self-important men of the novel who dispose of women like Captain Tilney does with Isabella and General Tilney and John Thorpe do with Catherine. Furthermore, in his trip to Fullerton to find Catherine, Henry “demonstrates that he will remain faithful to Catherine even in times of adversity, when doing so does not serve his self-interest” (Lau 473). Henry resolves to come to Catherine’s rescue after General Tilney’s ungentlemanlike dismissal knowing full well the damage he will cause to himself when he openly defies his father. Henry becomes a chivalrous hero, then, by doing what is right by Catherine. He offers himself up to the General’s wrath and is disowned by him for his actions. But Henry stands courageously by his decision to offer Catherine his hand in marriage and does not go back on his word, endeavoring to convince his father to change his mind so he can marry Catherine properly. Henry’s fidelity, his stalwart determination, and his affection ultimately pay off and he is rewarded with his happy ending.

Conclusion

The male characters in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* are a complicated set of men who fall victim to their own male privilege. From neglectful absentee father figures to toxic authoritarian patriarchs, from sensible heroes to villainous suitors, Austen’s medley of men are flawed, greedy, rank-conscious, patronizing, and selfish. Even the feminized hero must overcome

his own internalized misogyny to become a decent man and a chivalrous hero. Austen's artful construction of each of the male characters provides insight into the depth of their characterization beyond the static oversimplifications and disregard of critics and scholars. Through the neglect of Mr. Morland and Mr. Allen, James' and Captain Tilney's selfishness, General Tilney's and John Thorpe's villainy, and Henry's teasing and condescension we can see Austen's perception of male privilege and the patriarchal norms that kept women undereducated and defenseless against unwanted advances and unsolicited information in the eighteenth century. The use of the gothic conventions add a layer of levity and excitement reminiscent of Henry's teasing and sarcasm. Austen, therefore, uses Henry as a mouthpiece through which the underbelly of English Regency society can be displayed—specifically the male privilege of men of status and wealth. Henry's growth from feminized hero and patronizing teacher to chivalrous hero demonstrates that the ideal male character is written by women in defense of women. In *Northanger Abbey's* case, in defense of undereducated women like Catherine.

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