



Northanger Abbey: Toxic Masculinity or a New Paradigm for Healthy Relationships?

At first glance, *Northanger Abbey* (1817) might seem to repeat the trope of sexist man mentoring his wide-eyed future bride, but upon analysis, Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland's relationship proves more egalitarian. Fast forward two hundred years to the twenty-first century where morals and manners have blurred lines, and Jane Austen's wisdom into the nature of healthy relationships deserves close attention.

As co-founder and professional Matchmaker at "Matchmakers in the City", I understand the dynamics of courtship in a romantic relationship. At a time when women increasingly hold high-power careers, they find it harder to succeed in relationships and realize their desire to reclaim their femininity. I also work with men fearful that women will perceive chivalry as chauvinism.

Through creating *Northanger Abbey* as a "courtship bildungsroman" of both hero and heroine, Austen creates a new paradigm for masculinity and femininity, applicable to today's romantic relationships.¹ She presents Isabella and John Thorpe as the foils of Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney to show the pitfalls of a superficial understanding of courtship and attraction. In addition, critics have yet to contrast Catherine and Henry with the hero and heroine in Frances Burney's novel *Cecilia* (1782), to which Austen alludes directly, and indirectly, in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen reworks these characters' flawed versions of masculinity and femininity in her novel to reveal how men and women, through their understanding of masculinity and femininity, either edify or sabotage one another, all in the name of love.

At the beginning of the first section, this article will examine definitions of femininity and then, in the second section, definitions of masculinity, from sources including the Oxford English Dictionary and



Dr. Samuel Johnson's 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*. It will then contrast Austen's understanding of these terms in Catherine and Henry with other characters in the novel. Next, I briefly compare them with Cecilia Beverly and Mortimer Delvile from one of the most popular novels of the time for more contextual evidence.² I chose *Cecilia* over the other novels mentioned in *Northanger Abbey*; Austen inverts Cecilia and Mortimer with Catherine and Henry in important ways to ensure Catherine and Henry's future marital success. Austen creates her own conception of what it means to be a virtuous female or male with Catherine exhibiting the qualities of forbearance, humility, and candor, and Henry the qualities of respect, thoughtful action, and courage. It would take much longer to detail additional qualities that they possess, but these act as building blocks for a healthy relationship. Austen upholds the above standard feminine and masculine characteristics while repudiating others like extreme passivity and domineering force, and her ideas stand the test of time. They can help singles face the common dating struggles that I have witnessed through my eight years of experience with clients nationally and internationally.

Definitions of Femininity and Catherine's Contrasting Femininity

Even in Jane Austen's time, many misunderstood femininity as weak, fragile, and passive. While Johnson's *Dictionary* lacks this specific term, he does define similar words. According to Johnson, "feminality" means "female nature" which sounds like the current OED first definition of femininity: "Behaviour or qualities regarded as characteristic of a woman; feminine quality or characteristics; womanliness." Other than "of the sex that brings young; female", Johnson defines feminine as "soft; tender; delicate" sourced from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) as well as "effeminate; emasculated" from Sir Walter Raleigh's *The History of the World* (1614). Both source texts see the feminine at best as weak, and at worst, as defective. Milton's Adam calls women "this fair defect / Of nature" lamenting why God did "not fill the world at once / With men, as angels, without *feminine*"? Consequently, the OED's second definition is "depreciative". Feminine quality or characteristics as considered undesirable (esp. in a man); effeminacy". In addition, Johnson quotes Raleigh, "Ninias was no man of war at all, but alto-

gether *feminine* and subjected to ease and delicacy." Here "feminine" connotes laziness and frivolity.

However, certain traditionally "passive" feminine qualities, like "humility and honesty", when followed to their logical conclusion, allow Catherine to show an active interest in Henry while still letting him lead and pursue her. Joanne Cordón quotes Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and argues that "conduct books saturate domestic fiction . . . generally elevating the 'passive virtues such as modesty, humility and honesty'".³ The *Northanger Abbey* narrator avers Catherine's obvious "partiality for" Henry, "I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a second thought". Catherine may have liked Henry first, but she allows him to pursue her to win her heart and her hand in marriage.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen deals with negative stereotypes of the feminine in a farcical way from the beginning of the novel. In the first line, the narrator proclaims, "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine". With the plethora of negations that Austen uses to describe Catherine, and her hero Henry Tilney, scholars, like Terry Castle, have posited that Catherine is an "anti-heroine",⁴ and others have called her everything from a "dense" bungler⁵ to "a feminist heroine".⁶ More precisely, Catherine exhibits the truest form of heroinism: while lacking certain worldly attributes, she possesses many virtuous qualities.

For instance, the narrator describes Catherine as "plain" as a young girl and then "almost pretty" when she matures, which contrasts her to the beautiful heroines of other novels mentioned in *Northanger Abbey* like *Cecilia*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *Camilla* (1796). In their notes to *Northanger Abbey*, Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye explain, "the heroines of gothic fiction were always radiantly beautiful in face and figure".⁷ Without the physical beauty of a typical heroine in youth, Catherine "greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush". The narrator uses wit and humor to reveal the triviality of female standard "heroic" activities. Instead, Catherine's heroinism runs deeper than a stock image of a

girl in a regency greeting card or romantic novel.

In contrast to Catherine, Isabella Thorpe exhibits the physical attributes of a typical heroine, the picture of young lady "with great personal beauty", but that masks the emptiness inside of her. She even shares "the name of one of the heroines in *The Castle of Otranto, a Gothic Story*, the novel by Horace Walpole that started the craze for gothic romances".⁸ However, Isabella's inconstancy reveals how a mere display of femininity degrades it into a manifestation of French feminist scholar Luce Irigaray's concept of "the market". In her essay "Women on the Market" (1985), Irigaray reveals how the world has defined the commodification of women: measuring women's worth based on beauty and accomplishments. As a result, by treating a woman as a commodity, "its value is never found within itself," and "woman derives her price from her relation to the male sex".⁹ Rather than cultivating their internal beauty, women judge their self-worth according to how men perceive and react to them. For instance, throughout *Northanger Abbey*, Isabella preoccupies herself with garnering men's attention: from the "two odious young men" whom she follows out of the pump room to James Morland and Captain Tilney.

Through following the world's prescription of a successful female, Isabella becomes a parody of femininity, the inverse of a true heroine. She possesses the outward attributes without the interior ones, which render her both superficial and fake, effusive but meaningless. Through only valuing appearances, she commodifies men with the same lens. She uses her feminine wiles as bargaining chips to win a husband. The classic example of a regency "gold-digger", she corrupts her power as a woman by attempting to ensnare the richest, most attractive, and highest status man who comes her way.

Isabella reveals how a superficial understanding of femininity and masculinity leads to both hating and obsessing over the opposite sex. With Catherine, Isabella sounds like a bad, overplayed pop song that propels listeners to idolize their crushes. With feminine forbearance, Catherine even reacts to Isabella's dramatization of her feelings with: "But you should not persuade me that I think so very much about Mr. Tilney, for perhaps I may never see him again." Catherine realizes that romanticizing a man, especially one who she has only

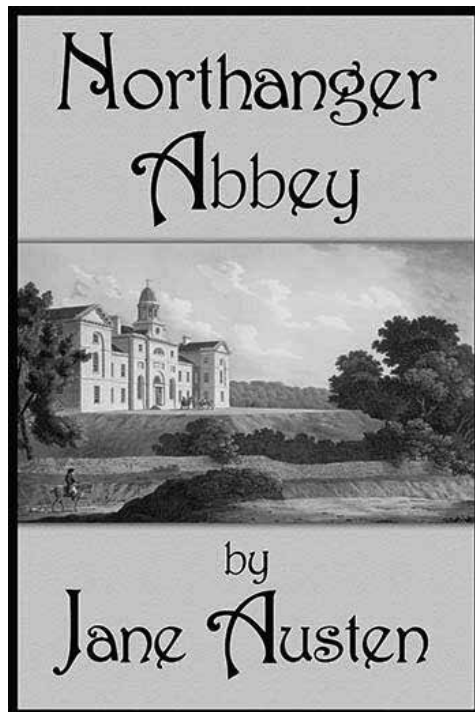
met once, hazards her emotional welfare and encourages her to live in an imaginary world. In effect, Isabella's approach causes women to lose their power of rational discernment through premature emotional attachment to men.

Even though Irigaray illuminates the market system, she analyzes it in terms of the male tyrant and underestimates the power of women who work to keep it in place for their own selfish and greedy aims. Both men *and* women establish the market through objectifying each other. From the beginning of Catherine's acquaintance with Isabella, Isabella reveals this attitude, calling men "the most conceited creatures in the world". Isabella and her brother John often negatively stereotype the opposite sex. Isabella states, "for people seldom know what they would be at, young men especially; they are so amazingly changeable and inconstant". She calls men "the fickle sex" but ironically enacts the exact characteristics that she criticizes and manifests a total disrespect for men. In her calculated coquetry and game playing with James Morland and Captain Tilney, she attempts to trade one in for the other to get the better bargain. While stringing James along, she flirts with Captain Tilney, where both Isabella and the Captain use the reductive language of body part commodification, "You men have none of you any hearts." He responds, "If we have not hearts, we have eyes; and they give us torment enough." In Captain Tilney, Isabella has found another player in the market system who drops her as easily as he had taken her up. When her plot fails, she tries to manipulate Catherine in order to help her return to James.

In buying into the market and objectifying men, women turn into commodities themselves. When Isabella attempts to double-time James and Captain Tilney, she portrays the "languid indifference" of extreme passivity. Through objectifying the opposite sex, Isabella gives others power to value her worth and identity. Cordón aptly argues, "Once Catherine disregards Isabella's disingenuous letter, Isabella herself is completely silenced in the novel".¹⁰ Contrasted with Isabella, Catherine shows that someone must willingly participate in the market to become a commodity.

Unlike Isabella, Catherine possesses interior feminine virtues, particularly candor and humility, integral characteristics that even the seemingly flawless *Cecilia* lacks. On the outside, Cecilia, heiress to her deceased parents' large fortune, has every-

thing that Catherine lacks: looks, money, and status.¹¹ As one of "ten children" and the daughter of "a clergyman", Catherine lives a financially comfortable life, but has much less materially to attract a husband than Cecilia. On the inside, Catherine lacks pride and prizes truth over decorum, while Cecilia silences herself with pride. For example, when Cecilia stays at Mortimer's family castle, both hero and heroine avoid each other. It takes getting stuck in a rainstorm for them to finally communicate.¹² This poses a stark contrast with Catherine and Henry's open and honest communication. When she finally sees Henry at the



theater, she eagerly says, "Oh! Mr. Tilney, I have been quite wild to speak to you, and make my apologies". In addition, Catherine has little pride and runs straight to the Tilneys to correct John Thorpe's lies about her.

Feminist scholars including Cordón laud Catherine's candor, which stems from her humility; as Sheila J. Kindred has argued, Catherine grows throughout the novel.¹³ Even when Catherine has every right to close her heart to the Tilneys after the General throws her out of Northanger, Elinor's words melt "Catherine's pride in a moment", revealing the depth of her humility.

Definitions of Masculinity and Henry's Contrasting Masculinity

While some, like Isabella, have rejected femininity for a mirage of power, masculinity has suffered even more. With the

devaluation of femininity, many men have also taken masculinity as a chimera of its true meaning. The OED defines it as "The state or fact of being masculine; the assemblage of qualities regarded as characteristic of men; maleness, manliness". Johnson defines masculine as "Male; not female" and "Resembling man; virile; not soft; not effeminate" from Joseph Addison's *Dialogues Upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals* (1726): "You find something bold and *masculine* in the air and posture of the first figure, which is that of Virtue". Through equating the masculine with virtue and strength, men run the risk of claiming superiority to women and pave the way for toxic masculinity to run rampant.

Toxic masculinity, a term missing from the eighteenth century, destroys men's virtues and relationships and is acting out a misrepresentation of masculinity. It takes masculine traits that Austen imbues in Henry of deep respect for others, especially women; courage; and thoughtful, confident action, as an outward performance rather than inward virtues. Even modern dictionaries lack precise definitions of this term, but major newspapers and journals have much to say about it. Senior Staff Editor and Reporter at *The New York Times* Maya Salam defines it in her 2019 article entitled "What is Toxic Masculinity?" as including demeaning acts, condescending behavior, and abuse towards others, usually women.¹⁴ In a 2019 article for *The Atlantic*, Dr. Michael Salter diagnoses it as "a catchall explanation for male violence and sexism". He explains that "the American Psychological Association introduced new guidelines for therapists working with boys and men, warning that extreme forms of certain 'traditional' masculine traits are linked to aggression, misogyny, and negative health outcomes".¹⁵ Toxic masculinity may have lacked a specific definition in the 1800s, but some of Austen's characters portray this contemporary idea.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen showcases Henry's witty and playful masculinity, that if taken literally, some might deem toxic by today's standards. Modern-day women might shudder at Henry's strange bigoted prattling, now deemed by pop culture as "man-splaining", but that reading ignores his propensity for sarcasm. At times, his satirical comments border on incivility, but critics often misunderstand him. For instance, the first time that Henry meets Catherine he jokes about women's common habit of keeping a journal filled with

vapid particulars. He then proclaims that women's letters are "faultless" except for their "general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar". Although he makes derogatory comments about ladies' letters and journals, he later reveals his penchant for novels, most penned by female authors. He asserts, "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid." In addition, his close relationship with his sister reveals his deep respect for women underneath his witticisms.

However, both Henry and the narrator exhibit the flaw of sarcasm, which Catherine discerns in Henry. On their first encounter, "Catherine feared, as she listened to their discourse, that he indulged himself too much with the foibles of others". If the reader takes Henry's sarcasm literally, she misunderstands the sarcasm of the narrator and satirical themes of the novel. For example, the narrator posits, "A woman, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can." Although "ignorance" in women is a trait prized by those who engage in the market system, the narrator pokes fun at those who think themselves as "too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire anything more". While Henry appreciates Catherine's naivety about drawing and her attention to his "lecture on the picturesque", he also values "all the excellencies of her character".

By comparing him to Mortimer Delville, the hero of *Cecilia*, Austen highlights the heroism that she paints in Henry. In her introduction to *Cecilia*, Doody argues, "Young Delville is very polite and charming, chivalrous under the pain of small accidents . . . but is not readily capable of ideas or decisions."¹⁶ Although he possesses many of the outward characteristics of a hero including his status as "heir" to his family's fortune, Mortimer lacks the most important ones that Henry possesses, despite Henry's position as the second son.¹⁷ As a result, Austen inverts Mortimer's dishonorable clandestine marriage proposal to Cecilia with Henry's honorable one to Catherine. Unlike Mortimer, Henry sensitively ascertains Catherine's feelings before he mentions his father's disapproval of their forthcoming marriage. The narrator confirms that Catherine "could not but rejoice in the kind caution with which Henry had saved her from the necessity of a conscientious rejection, by engaging her faith

before he mentioned the subject". Here, Austen indirectly alludes to Mortimer who pits Cecilia's honor against her love for him and tries to marry her secretly rather than upset his parents.¹⁸ He pressures Cecilia to act against her conscience. As opposed to Mortimer, Henry stands up to his father against General Tilney's injustice towards Catherine and would marry her regardless of General Tilney's approval.

Henry's healthy masculinity first reveals itself in his thoughtful courtship of Catherine: he gives her space to breathe, proceeding slowly and methodically. After a night of dancing and conversation with Henry, "her spirits danced within her as she danced in her chair all the way home". In contrast, chauvinistic John Thorpe bombards Catherine with unsolicited attention and pressures her to act contrary to her will. He lies to Catherine to get his way, and like Signor Montoni, the villain from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, John imprisons Catherine in his gig through bringing her to a castle. Despite her numerous entreaties to "stop", he only "laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on; and Catherine, angry and vexed as she was, having no power of getting away, was obliged to give up the point and submit". John forces Catherine into submission, while Henry honors her through obtaining her joyful affirmative before he even petitions her parents to marry her.

Just like Isabella, John stereotypes and objectifies the opposite sex. Upon first meeting Catherine, he comments on the appearance of "the face of every woman they met". He lumps all women together with "You women are always thinking of men's being in liquor". At the balls that they attend, John tries to establish ownership of Catherine. Like General Tilney, he is driven by money. They both pursue Catherine as a result of their misinformed notions of her wealth. Here, Austen criticizes those who generalize and criticize the opposite sex, men or women, for their own personal gain.

Henry and Catherine's Relationship

Catherine and Henry's relationship motivates them to evolve into more virtuous and empowered versions of themselves. Kindred argues for *Northanger Abbey* as a novel about "young love" that "A pattern of asking questions, of listening and learning is being established, and this pedagogical chemistry between Catherine and Henry will be important for her ongoing personal development".¹⁹ Cordón establishes how

their relationship catalyzes Henry's growth too.²⁰ Like iron sharpening iron, Catherine and Henry help each other to see their blind spots. When Henry parodies female friendship after Catherine discovers Isabella's true character, melodramatically positing, "in losing Isabella, you lose half yourself", Catherine replies, "No" after "a few moments' reflection". She honestly, but kindly, corrects him.

When Henry confronts Catherine sleuthing around his deceased mother's room, and she reveals her surmise that General Tilney murdered his own wife, at first, Henry's speech seems like the worst example of mansplaining. However, Henry brings Catherine back to reason, "Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is happening around you." Afterwards, "with tears of shame she ran off to her own room". His incisive, and at times condemning, comments lead to her own introspection, and "She hated herself more than she could even express". However, her mortification causes her growth. She refrains from victimizing herself; she takes responsibility for her actions and learns to "forgive herself".

Although critics may fault Catherine for preferring Henry's opinion to her own, she learns the value of contemplation and even helps Henry to see the evil underlying their everyday "Christian" society. As Cordón posits, "After reading [*The Mysteries of Udolpho*], Catherine has a way to understand her own feelings of discomfort around General Tilney by seeing him as a gothic villain".²¹ Catherine teaches Henry about the true nature of evil and what it means to be "Christians". After she learns that General Tilney wants her out of his house:

Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion.

She experiences the pains of rudeness and experiences the gothic in a spiritual sense. Cordón alludes to Claudia Johnson's *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988) when she illustrates, "the gothic reveals what the social obscures", and "Catherine's exposure gives her a

vocabulary to discuss transgressive male behavior".²² Catherine uses the words of gothic fiction to express her interior reality.

The truth sets Catherine free from fears, enabling her to comprehend, and help Henry to see, the true evil in her midst. Austen places prime importance on living in reality: Catherine falls when she lets her imagination get the best of her, and Isabella transgresses when she manipulates the truth to serve what she thinks will benefit her. Although Catherine finds herself mistaken in judging General Tilney as a murderer, Henry ultimately needs to apologize. The narrator describes, "Henry, in having such things to relate of his father, was almost as pitiable as in their first avowal to himself. He blushed for the narrow-minded counsel which he was obliged to expose". After his uncouth treatment of her, Catherine finds that she "had scarcely sinned against [General Tilney's] character" with her gothic imaginings. On her journey back to Fullerton from Northanger, instead of condemning herself, as General Tilney does, she comforts herself with her innocence.

Conclusion

Henry and Catherine's flaws make the work realistic and demonstrate how with courage and perseverance, love can triumph. Rather than asserting the superiority of one over the other, Austen reveals the complementarity of women and men, and how they can edify each other through expressing their masculinity and femininity in ways that nurture a relationship rather than sabotaging it. While both imperfect, Catherine and Henry provide a strong example of a healthy way forward.

Austen encourages women to reclaim femininity and inspire men. As a result of their false notion of femininity, often women have traded it for a type of toxic femininity that more subtly exhibits the same demeaning and abusive characteristics found in its masculine counterpart. Other women refuse to act with Isabella's fake femininity, so they throw it out completely. It is little surprise why, after years of regurgitated versions of Isabella as the world's paragon of femininity, women would rebel. A deeper understanding of femininity both empowers women and allows them to grow in virtue, if desired, with noble men at their sides.

Catherine shows a genuine femininity that all women naturally model. Only eighteen at the end of the novel, Catherine possesses naivety that others might confuse with stupidity. New to the ways of the

world in her small window of experience with a loving family, she had yet to meet a woman like Isabella who took her engagement lightly. Like other heroic couples in Austen's novels, Henry and Catherine's personalities, qualities, and drawbacks mesh well with each other. Henry's wit shines with Catherine instead of them both competing for the spotlight.

Women now eagerly want to rediscover and explore their femininity, which can lie dormant. In a culture that values people depending on how much they produce, femininity frequently goes undervalued, unappreciated, and misunderstood. However, when after years of suppressing it and only expressing their masculine traits that help them achieve and succeed in the workplace, women reveal to me that, in their heart of hearts, they want to exercise their femininity in a relationship. When women allow their femininity to shine through, men start discovering their masculinity; they need it to pursue the woman who challenges them to be the best version of themselves.

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8. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

9. Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," *French Feminism Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 215, 223.

10. Cordon, p. 49.

11. Burney's narrator describes Cecilia in the beginning of her first chapter as, "this fair traveler, had lately entered into the one-and-twentieth year of her age. Her ancestors had been rich farmers in the county of Suffolk, though her father, in whom a spirit of elegance had supplanted the rapacity of wealth, had spent his time as a private country gentleman, satisfied without increasing his store, to live upon what he inherited from the labours of his predecessors"; Burney, p. 5.

12. See particularly: Burney, chap. 3: "An Antique Mansion," p. 460 and chap. 5: "A Storm," p. 471.

13. Sheila J. Kindred, "From Puppet to Person: The Development of Catherine's Character in the Bath Chapters of *Northanger Abbey*," *Persuasions* 20 (1998): 196-97. <http://www.jasna.org/publications/persuasions/no20/kiindred/>.

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18. See Burney, especially chap. 4 "A Proposition," p. 552.

19. Kindred, pp. 196, 204.

20. Cordon, p. 41.

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