Power, Patriarchy, and Henry Tilney: Exploring Male Heroism in Northanger Abbey by Katie Garbarino

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Who comes to mind when listing Jane Austen’s great heroes? Fitzwilliam Darcy, certainly, and maybe George Knightley or Colonel Brandon. How about Henry Tilney? Why has he not been remembered in literature as a romantic hero, as so many of Austen’s characters have been? In her first novel, Northanger Abbey, written in 1798-1799, Austen explores the roles and pitfalls of patriarchy in Regency England; Henry, the male protagonist of the book, is a prime example of the many sides of patriarchy, both good and bad. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, feminist literary critics, recognize Austen’s focus on the patriarchy and proclaim Henry a villain in the novel—manipulative, dishonest, and contradictory. But Austen does not pen a villain in Henry; rather, she uses Tilney to discuss male paternalism in her society, specifically in relation to the women it maintained power over. Gilbert and Gubar, writing in 1979, ultimately mistake Austen’s surprisingly progressive hero for a character written only to criticize and tear down the English patriarchy. Austen’s carefully and cleverly chosen dialogue and plot in Northanger Abbey indirectly explore the idea of a benevolent patriarch—a figure who educates and guides, but who does not abuse. At the turn of the 19th century, this progressive paternalism constitutes a revolutionary kind of heroism.

Gilbert and Gubar state early in “Shut Up in Prose,” their essay analyzing Northanger Abbey, that the novel “finally expresses an indictment of patriarchy that could hardly be considered proper or even permissible in Austen’s day” (278). Patriarchy in Regency England was certainly a contentious and important issue. As Allen G. Johnson writes in his book Privilege, Power, and Difference (2006), systems organized around privilege “are dominated by privilege groups, identified with privilege groups, and centered on privilege groups” (90) (original emphasis). The privilege group in England, wealthy white males, was reinforced from all sides by primogeniture, the church, and educational institutions. As the Enlightenment took hold, however, thinkers like John Locke proclaimed the natural rights of every Illustrated scene from Chapter 22 of Northanger Abbey. This illustration by H. M. Brock appeared in a 1904 edition of the novel.
man, calling basic truths of hierarchical society into question. Was monarchy just? Who has the right to rule, and how do they come upon that right? Inevitably, discussion of patriarchy and women sprang up in this atmosphere. Austen did have a preoccupation with male domination and centrality in her society, and *Northanger Abbey* certainly reflects that interest. As in her later novels with the complicated and proud Mr. Darcy, the kind and magnanimous Colonel Brandon, and the reclusive and resigned Mr. Bennet, Austen creates male characters in *Northanger* who complicate the patriarchal roles of men in her time. Chief among these characters is Henry, a young man with whom Catherine, the protagonist, quickly becomes enamored. Henry is complex: he speaks in riddles and jokes, he has a skeptical awareness of his culture that many other characters lack, and he takes a kind of careful pleasure in guiding Catherine through his society. Gilbert and Gubar criticize Henry’s manipulation and power over Catherine throughout the story. But can Austen’s discussion of the patriarchy, especially through Henry, be categorized as an “indictment”?

Henry, at first introduction, is absolutely charming. He is the first friendly face Catherine meets in Bath, and his conversation and cheery vigor are in sharp contrast to the rest of the dreary, unfamiliar company. At their meeting and dance, Henry realizes his fault in not inquiring after proper subjects, and “affectedly softening his voice, he [adds] with a simpering air, ‘Have you long been in Bath, madam?’” (13). Henry is making light of the pretentious and false cultural conventions of the day. Later in this scene, Henry defends both novels and history to Catherine, claiming that novels are highly enjoyable, even to a man such as himself, and that history writers “are perfectly well qualified to torment readers of the most advanced reason and mature time of life” (99). Education and upbringing were a means of social dominance in Austen’s time, allowing men to determine the culture’s identity. Austen purposefully associates the women in her story with the gothic novel and ladies’ journals, while the men read history and the newspaper. Later in the walk, Eleanor and Henry survey the countryside with artists’ eyes, and Catherine can do nothing but listen and walk along. Henry notices and starts teaching her, and he is eventually “delighted with her progress” (101). Here Henry most clearly teaches Catherine about both knowledge and, indirectly, behavior in society.

A woman in her Catherine’s was expected to be quiet, graceful, and ignorant. “Wit,” writes Dr. John Gregory to his daughters in 1774, “is the most dangerous talent you can possess.” He later goes on to urge his daughters to keep any good learning “a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding” (Gregory 220-221). Patriarchal society expected women to keep their knowledge, wit, humor, and even personalities during that time, Henry makes light of the antics happening all around him. Still, Henry is a male in a society dominated by males. Although Gilbert and Gubar interpret his casual nature and joking as manipulation, in his introduction, we see him simply as a self-aware patriarch. He becomes a guide and a friend, watching out for Catherine as she adapts to society. According to the androcentric system of the time, though, he is also her social superior. His is a tricky balance.

The theme of literature and education is essential in *Northanger Abbey* and adds much depth to Henry’s role. Henry quickly becomes a teacher for the naïve Catherine. During a casual walk, which becomes a pivotal thematic scene in the novel, Henry defends both novels and history to Catherine, claiming that novels are highly enjoyable, even to a man such as himself, and that history writers “are perfectly well qualified to torment readers of the most advanced reason and mature time of life” (99). Education and upbringing were a means of social dominance in Austen’s time, allowing men to determine the culture’s identity. Austen purposefully associates the women in her story with the gothic novel and ladies’ journals, while the men read history and the newspaper. Later in the walk, Eleanor and Henry survey the countryside with artists’ eyes, and Catherine can do nothing but listen and walk along. Henry notices and starts teaching her, and he is eventually “delighted with her progress” (101). Here Henry most clearly teaches Catherine about both knowledge and, indirectly, behavior in society.
hidden. Education meant power, and the ultimate educators of England, the men, held that power. Women’s lack of education led them to novels as a form of further education, earning novels a reputation as silly and insignificant. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, Catherine herself is ashamed of her love for novels, and she comments to Henry that novels “are not clever enough” for him and “gentlemen read better books” (95). Gilbert and Gubar argue that Austen substantiates “her feeling that prejudice against the novel is widespread” in this scene, and “shows how even an addicted reader of romances (who has been forced, like so many girls, to substitute novel reading for formal education) needs to express disdain for the genre” (281). Catherine is ashamed because novels reveal the weakness of women on several levels. The powerlessness of the novel in that time, therefore, can be tied to the powerlessness of women.

Henry, whether he realizes it fully or not, accepts this feminine weakness through his actions. At several junctures in the novel, Austen comments that ignorance such as Catherine’s often wins men’s hearts. On the same walk with Catherine and his sister Eleanor, Henry uses double-speak to confuse Catherine. He finds a simple misunderstanding between Eleanor and Catherine very entertaining; he explains Eleanor’s mistake and comments that “the fears of the sister have added to the weakness of women in general” (102). Eleanor later commands him to explain to Catherine that he was not serious in his disparagement of female understandings, but he continues to joke. “In my opinion,” he quips, “nature has given [women] so much that they never find it necessary to use more than half” (103). The reader is left to wonder to what extent he truly believes his exaggerations.

When examining Henry as a teacher, though, we must also consider Catherine’s own synonym for teaching: “torment.” Catherine admits that Henry “might think [her] foolish to call instruction torment, but if you had been as much used as [her] to hear poor little children first learning their letters… and how tired [her] poor mother is at the end of it… you would allow that ‘to torment’ and ‘to instruct’ might sometimes be used as synonymous words” (99). Here Catherine expresses herself bravely and clearly; a teacher, who coaxes someone to believe something or know something they did not at first accept, is also a tormentor. Henry, in a way, is subtly teaching Catherine how to conform to society, and thus tormenting her into new and artificial habits expected in that time.

In this light, Henry’s teaching becomes oppressive. Gilbert and Gubar take this oppression and interpret it as true villainy. Catherine is indeed more easily shaped by Henry, whom she likes and admires, than by the manipulative Thorpes of earlier in the book. Henry becomes even more sinister than others trying to harm Catherine because she trusts him completely. Gilbert and Gubar state firmly that the novel is about Catherine being made into a heroine, a sort of male-birthed monster. “Catherine Morland… is also ‘an incipient monster,’” they claim, “not very different from the monsters that haunt Austen’s contemporary, Mary Shelley” (290-291). Henry—through his stories, subtle misogyny, and final rebuke of Catherine near the end of the novel—midwifes this unnatural transformation from girl to monster. According to the authors, Catherine “is further victimized by the process of depersonalization begun in Bath when she wholeheartedly adopts Henry’s view and even entertains the belief ‘that Henry Tilney could never be wrong’” (288). The ultimate tragedy of the novel, in their opinion, is Catherine’s loss of identity in the superficial and deceptive society of the time. Henry, they claim, plays a negative role in her ultimate fate. Catherine loses her last vestige of personality at the hands of Henry Tilney.

But painting Henry as such a cruel and villainous figure is a very narrow position. As we have seen, Henry is not simply a tormentor or captor; he is also a benevolent teacher, gentleman, and love interest. In Henry’s lessons and rebukes, Austen begins to form the complication and in-
evitable paradox of such a character. Gilbert and Gubar’s argument against Henry hinges on one of the final events of the book: Catherine’s obsession with the late Mrs. Tilney, who she believes is buried deep within the abbey. General Tilney, the epitome of a cruel patriarch, has a negative influence on his children, she knows, so she lets her imagination run away with her. She decides the General has Mrs. Tilney locked up in the abbey. She sneaks downstairs, expecting to be quite alone, to inspect the woman’s apartments. Henry finds her there, and rebukes her for her foolishness. “Remember the country and age in which we live,” he urges her, “remember that we are English, that we are Christians” (180). Catherine suspects the General of terrible cruelty, murder perhaps, and Henry chides her as he would a child. He cites God, country, social pressure, and, importantly, education and literacy. This torment, in the Gilbert and Gubar essay, completes Catherine’s transformation. She pushes all original thoughts out of her head, hoping to become the perfect student Henry seems to admire and want. Her suspicions (grounded in reality, for the General is corrupt and manipulative) are proved false, and Henry’s reproach is too much for her to bear. We must, though, examine this exchange from Henry’s point of view. Like Catherine, he is limited by his place in society. Catherine is a naïve and defenseless woman; Henry is a powerful and knowledgeable man. Henry, an intelligent male in a patriarchal society, would not and could not understand the insecurity and vulnerability of a girl like Catherine. He could not understand her fear of the General, as he is not vulnerable to his potential cruelty. His reproach does not display villainy, but rather his realistic limitations and responsibility in society.

Pivotal, Henry is a patriarch, an oppressor by definition, yet he is self-aware, he is constructive, and he is kind. He knows his role, as displayed during his first encounter with Catherine, on their walk together, and even in their final confrontation. Henry has power, and with that power, he teaches and guides. Though bound in his role, Henry becomes the first of Austen’s male characters to become a benevolent patriarch, and—relatively speaking—an heroic one. He teaches Catherine not to belittle her or torment her, but to educate her and give her power, or as much power as a woman could safely possess in such a society. He confronts Catherine not to humiliate her, but to set her straight and guide her. During his chastisement, Henry calls Catherine “dearest” (180). The next day, he pays the “awakened” Catherine “rather more attention than usual” (181). The reader and Catherine feel this contradiction, this illogicality. Exercising his role as a patriarch, Henry does not become unattached or cruel, but emerges more invested in Catherine and more caring.

In Henry, Austen does not proclaim revolution against men with a strong “indictment” of patriarchy. She does not attempt to start a feminist revolution and tear down the institutions of her day. She does, however, portray kindness, self-awareness, and cleverness as the qualities of a hero. Henry is a man who enjoys his place in society without abusing it, and, while doing so, elevates Catherine rather than harms her. He does make mistakes, as Gilbert and Gubar point out—he torments almost as often as he gently teaches, and he mistakes Catherine’s cry for help as a foolish fantasy. Henry does nothing to diminish his position in society and does nothing to expand his privilege to include the women around him. Most significantly, though, he recognizes his mistakes. He appears at Catherine’s house after she has been thrown out by his father, and acknowledges “that after what had passed he had little right to expect a welcome in Fullerton” (221). Henry gives his explanations and his apologies, and the two become engaged.

To Gilbert and Gubar, the ending is abrupt and tragic. Catherine is trapped with Henry, and nothing improves. Northanger Abbey, though, is the first of many excellent novels by Austen, and each takes a step forward. She begins with Henry,
proud, kind, and mostly traditional, in 1798. As we have discussed, Henry defies his own father and culture, even in simply caring for Catherine and apologizing to her. Sense and Sensibility, conceived of around the same time though published later, also features a rather unforgiving and realistic look at male suitors. Like Henry, Colonel Brandon and Edward have sweetness about them; they are respectful, kind and magnanimous. Still, the romance of the books is slightly hollow due to the overbearing patriarchy looming in the background. The women of the book, such strong and complicated characters, get traded and tossed around like items.

Pride and Prejudice was published next; Austen wrote it very early but revised it heavily before its publication. Mr. Darcy, the most famous of Austen’s heroes, fervently seeks an equal, someone to challenge him in life. And even in this famous romance, there are twinges of the patriarchy that Austen never forgets. Darcy struggles with Elizabeth’s lack of connection, and Elizabeth likes Darcy a good bit more after seeing his fine house and surveying all she could gain from such a match. Later in her life, Austen published Emma. This novel was shocking; the protagonist was a woman who controlled her own household in the place of her ailing father. Though, in the end, she marries Mr. Knightley, they live in her father’s house, suggesting a very liberal balance of marital power. On top of this, Knightley is very much Emma’s friend, not her superior, as they used to be step-siblings. In her last completed novel, Persuasion, published posthumously in 1818, Austen progresses even further. Separated by selfish relations, the heroine Anne and Captain Wentworth, her former fiancé, must reconcile as equals before they can have their happy ending. Wentworth is a self-made man; he is not from old money, but a naval officer who earns his own fortune. The novel rings of change; Anne is appreciated and celebrated by her hero, and their love removes her from her cruel family, improving her situation. The heroes of Austen’s works, then, developed over her career. Henry is just the first step—and even a bold one—for his time.

Austen uses Northanger Abbey not as a battle cry against patriarchal institutions, but as a commentary on literature, education, the novel, and the patriarch. As the Enlightenment took hold in England, intellectuals began to examine patriarchal power, enforced through the church, education, and so many other institutions. Austen joined this examination and offered her own take on the possibilities of a benevolent teacher, companion, and social superior. Austen realized the limitations of her own society, just as Henry does, and wrote a book that focused on the possibility of benevolent paternalism rather than on the far-off (and unthinkable) goal of true independence and respect for women. Austen begins with Henry, but he is not the end. She develops her expectations and definition of a male hero as she writes and matures. Henry is an early examination of and experimentation with the limits, virtues and contradictions of a pillar of English society. Is Henry a hero appropriate for modern culture and society? Certainly not. But why should the role and values of a hero stay the same throughout time and place?

Works Cited

Garbarino, “Power, Patriarchy, and Henry Tilney"